**University of Alberta**

***Nitohta anohc. Nâkatohke.***
***Now Listen. Listen Hard.***

# A Creative Study of *Nehiyawewin*, the Plains Cree Language, and the Reasons for Its Preservation.

**by**

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©

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**Abstract**

Recent Canadian censuses, 1996 and 2001, reveal fewer *Nehiyawak*, Plains Cree people, speaking *Nehiyawewin* at home, the most fertile ground for preserving language and culture. *Nehiyawak* use the verb *wâhkôhtowak* to describe people who are related to each other and the noun *wâhkôhtowina* to speak of familial and cultural bonds. While these kindred are vital to linguistic survival, linguicide threatens even a viable language such as *Nehiyawewin*. Not a new phenomenon but one that has progressed over the last half millennium the pace of linguistic loss hastens at a troubling rate, comparing conspicuously to reduced biological diversity in the natural world. Potentially most catastrophic is the extinction of Aboriginal truths, worldviews rich with meaning and phonic mystery: what does it mean to speak *Nehiyawewin*? To laugh in *Nehiyawewin*? To be angry or sad? To love or be spiritual? I offer this thesis as my creative contribution to this critical dialogue.

## *nîkânitwewin*—Preface—to speak before
## *nîkâni-pîkiskwe*—to speak first

### The Road to Writer's Block (A Poem to Myself)

Turn left at desire. Take this burden
and never let go. Cling
as a burr latches onto fleece.
Be sure that your load includes
the self-imposed responsibility to learn
a threatened language: namely *Nehiyawewin*.
Go home: *Kîwe*.
Head north: *Kîwetinohk*.
Take a route unknown to you.
Do not plan too far
into the future. Do step forth with mute
naïveté. Invent a folktale so fantastic it can't
be disbelieved. Do this in the same way
you would mould green truth from fact, tender
like the first prairie crocus—*wapikwanes*.

The story must tell of your entitlement:
your right to write
poetry in this native tongue. Approach
this task without foresight,
as you would a one-way street on a dark night,
backwards: *sâsakici*.
Entitlement: a provocative word
when it comes to language and culture,
a word so easily twisted to mean
ownership. Worry about this enough
that it becomes humiliating.
Try reading and writing your second
mother tongue before listening and speaking.
Forget that poetry and Cree were spoken before written. Forget
this as you might your toothbrush, aspirins, or first-aid kit.
Forget not your Cree dictionaries,
because for all your literacy your aural
memory will be poor when you see the words
in print, twenty-five or even fifty times.
Bear the millstone of language loss
the way a woman drags home the last
buffalo: *paskwâwimostosw*,
as you confront the colonial tongue.
*Âkayâsîmowin*: the only patois
you'll ever perform with any finesse.

Learn how you've not learned
another mother tongue, well, a father
tongue: Scots Gaelic. Never mind
provisions other than baggage so heavy
it will take you years to reach your destination.
Don't forget your heaviest tool,
a wrench to repair the damage you wrought
in admonishing your father for speaking
in code: namely *Nehiyawewin*.
Take a course so meandering you'll forget
where you're going. Learn the Latin terms,
and then forget them,
for beauty you'll behold before
even considering their Cree existence:
Pelicans, Bitterns, Great Blue Herons, Mergansers.
Now, write these bird words in *Nehiyawewin*:
*cahcahkiwak, môhkahasiwak, misimôhkahawisak, sîsîp kinosewa môwew nestâw*.

Detour around decades of indifference
until you're so far past puberty
that learning a second language disorients
you the way adolescence
attacks all its victims,
the way an overturned canoe crashes
through wild rapids.
Become so encumbered procrastination
offers your only reprieve. Argue with your sister
with such intensity she is moved
to leave a message on your answering machine,
how she couldn't sleep last night: a wrangle
about history and pioneers and Indians,
the *Indian Act* and racism and loss.
Argue from the passenger seat of her parked car,
so ferociously you can't quite separate
one issue from the other, or
even remember what your position is. Fathom
your frustration. Negotiate
an awkward amnesty two nights later
in a telephone conversation,
but contemplate your confusion
as a monk might meditate on meaning…

Once you find
your way back to a quest choked
with bus fumes, stinging nettles, and inarticulateness,
ruminate on your lack of fluency:
*môya nipakaskinehiyawân.*

Embark on this pilgrimage in the midst
of your father's passing. Start
a poem for your father, two weeks after he dies,
and title it *Tawâw*, but leave it
for a year because it's just too hard to write.
Tell Cree people why you,
a *mônîyâw 'skwew*,
try to write poetry in Cree and English. Tell
them in *Nehiyawewin* as they lean
toward your crude Cree, trying
to understand, trying to give you some of their loss.
Speak these words, over and over, rehearsing them until you know you sound fluent:
*Ninohtenehiyawân osâm ekîpakaskît nohtâwîpan. Ayîkisâkahikanihk*
*ohci wîya mâka môya ekînehiyawit, ekîmônîyawit.*
*Ekwa mîna ehâpihtaw 'kosisaniskwewit nikâwiy.*
Say these words because they're the most important. Consider
your mother's experience, because she's old enough to want
not to talk about being Métis. Study
the boundaries of the Métis National Council and then
don't worry about them because they seem like
four first place ribbons at a local track meet. Stop
short of immersing yourself in a Cree community, the most
effective means of achieving fluency.

Learn about Cree syllabics:
Become so literate
you can teach them and maybe even
Standard Roman Orthography,
but don't expect fluency in a classroom.
When you write that word—
*cahkipehikanak*,
doubt your tongue and consult your grammar
guide yet again just to make sure
you got the plural suffix right. Now quit
doubting yourself because your tongue remembers.

Take on transcribing and transliterating
a Catholic prayer book—written entirely
in Cree syllabics—that takes
only God knows how long to complete,

agreeing to translate the last fifty pages:
hand-numbing, elbow-aching, mind-worrying,
tongue-stuttering work as you labour over the words
in their strange Oblate orthography. Trust
only Dorothy, *awa iskwew kâkitotôtemimisk ekwa kâpakiskît*,
and the linguist from Saskatchewan
to verify your work.

Discover that you're a visual learner,
not aural. Then read everything written
about language and culture and with a certain innocence
partake in Indian and identity and language
politics, always brooding over Cree poetics.
Take so many Cree classes you lose count. But do
*kiskinohamâkosi tân'si nehiyawâkihcike:*
*peyak, nîso, nisto, ...*

You cannot circumvent this unbeaten path, cannot skirt
the boulders and roots and loneliness of this mission.
But remember pen and paper anyway:
you'll need them each time you learn a new Cree word.
Then throw away your writing materials: *wepina*,
or stuff them so far down into your grizzled,
arthritic backpack they'll be too deep to dig out.
Now listen.
*Nitohta anohc.*
Listen hard.
*Nâkatohke.*
Listen to these Cree words, these beautiful Cree words:
*Nitohta ohci ôhi Nehiyawîtwewina, ôhi katawasisinwa Nehiyawîtwewina.*
Maybe then you'll become not so much
a fluent Cree speaker but
a fluent Cree listener.[1]

But hurry! You haven't much time.
*Mâka kakweyâho! Môya kitawipayihikon.*

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[1] Mark Abley, *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003) 41.

## *Kinanâskomitinâwâw*—I Thank You All

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Paul, where do I start? In your classroom, I think. Your response to my query about cultural and linguistic loss in a global community that insists on the language of

economy started this whole business, my thesis that is. Your recognition of the heart I put into my papers and your critical feedback have both enhanced my development as a writer and a thinker. Thank you for a great lunch and long talk earlier this spring, and for your confidence in my integrity. Finally, I'm not sure how you knew what day I was to defend my thesis but your telephone call the night before to tell me that I'm wonderful and marvelous and confident and that I can talk and that not every thesis generates this much interest helped me believe that defending a work as visceral as mine might be possible. I was able, for the most part, to follow your advice not to be defensive, just to answer the questions, and to try and enjoy my defence. Thank you so very much for your guidance and your friendship. *Kinanâskomitin.*

Former classmates Lisa Gunderson and Anjah Howard deserve very special mention. Lisa, you are a dear friend and your scholarly interest in my work means a great deal to me. Thank you so much for your encouragement over all this time. *Ay hai.* Thank you, Anjah, very kindly for your friendship and for feeding me so well when it became obvious just how much of a toll this graduate degree would exact on me. Thank you as well for the lovely Jerry Daniels picture, "Evening Silence." *Ay hai.*

I would be remiss if I failed to thank my Maker. I believe in a Creator because how on earth would we have survived so much historical horror if it were not for ancient truths, contained in the ways of the Old Ones. *Kinanâskomitin Kise-Manitow ohci mitoni kayâsi-tâpwewin.*

## *Awa Wâpanacâhkos ekwa Awa Wakinâkanak*
## Introduction: The Morning Star and the Tamarack

Years ago, I asked a professor in a Contemporary Literature course why marginalized people should learn to speak a colonial language if it meant all things outlandish might leak or flood into Indigenous cultures. I still remember Dr. Paul Harland's response. He acknowledged the dilemma facing speakers of tribal tongues and suggested that colonized peoples might consider learning the oppressor's language as a means to understanding the thought processes of the oppressor and to strategically engaging in a purposeful decolonizing effort. Such is the calamity: reduced numbers of Indigenous-language speakers signify arguably the most troubling aspect of one culture dominating another. In 1996, 95,555 people had some knowledge of the Cree language in Canada, compared to 92,630 in 2001, a decline of 3.1 %. Speakers of the Cree language as their mother tongue numbered 82,420 in 1996; in 2001 this figure had diminished to 77, 285, revealing a decrease of 6.2% (Statistics Canada 21). Censoring *Nehiyawewin* dams the flow of Cree as the pulse of a people. While cultures can survive linguistic erosion, such a loss denotes the indiscriminate restriction on a people's freedom of speech and perception. Language loss is a symptom of one society's demand that the marginalized subscribe to reality as do the dominant.

*Nehiyawewin* has the good fortune to be one of the more viable Indigenous languages in Canada, along with Ojibwe and Inuktitut. Kinkade explains viable languages as having "a large enough base of speakers of all ages" that survival in the long term seems "relatively assured" (163). Even so, all three of these languages suffered declines in recent censuses. For both mother tongue speakers and Aboriginal

non-speakers of these languages, these losses pose serious threats to their cultures. A person's mother tongue, the language she or he first learns and speaks at home as a child, may not necessarily be the same as a home language, classified as that language spoken most frequently at home (Norris 10). Linguists identify another factor, knowledge or ability, to describe those people who can converse in a language, though they may not be entirely fluent. These indicators assist language researchers in examining the use of languages at home or in society. Ability indices compare numbers for those who can speak the language with numbers for those who report that language as their mother tongue. The continuity index determines "language continuity, or vitality" also by comparing the number of "those who speak a given language…to the number of those who learned that language as their mother tongue" but this time those who also speak it at *home* (Norris 10). The continuity index does not include, as the ability index does, those mother tongue speakers of an indigenous language who do not speak it in their home. This distinction is critical for reversing language shift, especially in terms of intergenerational transmission: "sustained used of Aboriginal languages at home is an essential condition for their survival" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 615).

Other factors influencing Aboriginal culture and communication include geography, modernization, discouragement or prohibition in residential schools, contact with colonial tongues, and the predominant orality of many Indigenous languages (Norris and Jantzen 94). Speakers of Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut do not have such obstacles as mountains and gorges that Indigenous groups in British Columbia face (Norris 10). Consequently, there are a number of isolated languages

with no known relatives in British Columbia, and most of these languages are in danger of extinction with only a very few and very old speakers remaining. A history and geography spanning most of Canada between north-eastern Quebec and northern British Columbia and south onto the plains into Montana and North Dakota has afforded the Cree some advantage in linguistic longevity. Campbell suggests a caveat on such an assumption, however, in observing that "biogeographic zones do not constitute strong linguistic barriers" (105). Aside from the political trappings surrounding language debates, linguistic, biological, and geographical theories remain challenged by the uniqueness and diversity heard in Indigenous languages in the western hemisphere. Notwithstanding these academic arguments the colonial process has tested even a civilization as comparatively widespread as the Cree is.

In the early twenty-first century, modernizing and globalizing forces pose even more ominous threats to Indigenous peoples across the globe. Will our understanding of truth be reduced to stardom, infamy, and Internet chat rooms? With a little reflection we can see a parallel between language death and the reduction of biological diversity. The buffalo was slaughtered nearly to extermination in the mid-1800s to supply the ravenous robe trade. How much Red Osier Dogwood does the logging industry now crush in its pursuit of more valuable timber? How drinkable is the water in the Athabasca River downstream from Fort McMurray, or even from Brule closer to the river's source in the mountains? Who would remember the noun *paskwâwimostosw* and the magnificence of those massive beasts, the palindrome *kinnikinnik* and its spiritual significance as an offering to the Creator, or the verb *kikwâpikestamâtin* if I were to offer to bring you some water if industrial pursuits had

not already erased these cultural experiences from our memories? Homogenizing urges such as the various media assaulting our senses daily, coupled with manufactured fear, threaten to silence speech not in line with English and other dominant languages and to suppress unique ways of perceiving and thinking about reality. These worries should not be relegated to the bottom of a list that begins with oil and ends with extinction.

Where does the hope lie in learning a marginalized, Indigenous language such as *Nehiyawewin*? I can only respond that I am who I am and I came to this place by canoe, *nikîpetâpoyin*. I came here by canoe, not because it is a stereotype of the fading Indian,[1] an image obscured by early morning fog on the North Saskatchewan River. No, *nikîpetâpoyin*, because I have a singular attachment to the North Saskatchewan River. Having canoed this river from nearly its source at the Saskatchewan Glacier in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta to its mouth at Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, and beyond, I have learned some of the older, richer names for this conduit and its many features. Peter Kulchyski advises us to take part in "the setting right of names, the righting of names as much as the writing of names" (13) in our discussions of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, even as we refer to older, erroneous labels found in the literature. And so I'll right some names. First, the river: *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*. *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*, in fact, locates many of those people who speak *Nehiyawewin*. They are *Nehiyawak*, the Plains Cree. Related to those peoples European interlopers labelled Cree, Cris, Cristinaux, Christino, Kristinaux,

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[1] I will use several terms, Indian, First-Nation, Aboriginal, Native, Métis, Mixed-Blood, Treaty, Status, Non-Status, Reserve, Off-Reserve, Indigenous, specific names of bands, etc. throughout this study. I use the word "Indian," not in an ignorant way, but in an informed manner because of its place in the historical literature.

Killistinaux (Dickason 120), Kenistenaag (McFarlane and Haimila 300), Kilistinon, or Cristeen (Bishop 152), these *iyiniwak* have a variety of names for themselves, often depending where they lived and live on or near the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*.[2]

Plains Cree people, in addition to calling themselves *Nehiyawak*, might also have referred to themselves as Prairie People, or *Paskwâwiyiniwak*. *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* and other waterways provided an abundance of resources for *Nehiyawak* on the plains and in the aspen parkland of what are now the two westernmost prairie provinces, Saskatchewan and Alberta. The Downstream People, *Mâmihkiyiniwak*, one of two major divisions of *Nehiyawak* living along or connected to the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*, were known by a variety of other names determined by their more local surroundings: *Posâkanacîwiyiniwak* for the Touchwood Hills People southeast of Saskatoon, *Tepwewisîpîwiyiniwak* for the Calling River People of the Qu'Appelle River in southeastern Saskatchewan, and *Wâposwayânak* for the Rabbitskin People from the Nekaneet (*kâ-nîkânît*) First Nation near Maple Creek in southwestern Saskatchewan (Wolvengrey 2:482). All of these *Mâmihkiyiniwak* would have lived in what we now know as the province of Saskatchewan. The Upstream People, *Natimîyiniwak*, were more western Plains Cree who lived upstream on the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*, in Alberta, and had, themselves, a number of appellations: *Amiskowacîwiyiniwak* for those living near Beaver Hills east of Edmonton, *Paskohkopâwiyiniwak* for the Parklands People as the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* is in the transition zone of the aspen parkland between the prairies and the boreal forest, *Sîpîwiyiniwak* for the River People and *Wâskahikaniwiyiniwak* for the House People

[2] I use both past and present tenses because *Nehiyawak* continue to thrive in rural areas and in cities such as Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, and even in Calgary—Blackfoot country—, Vancouver, and other parts of Canada.

living near *Amiskwacîwâskahikanihk* (Wolvengrey 2:482). Surely these titles speak of meaningful stories and histories. How have more recent European signatures obscured these narratives? I offer these historic names of the various Plains Cree peoples and their designations for other groups to set right their names in their own language, *Nehiyawewin*.

I live in Cree Country—*epimâtisiyân paskwâwiyinînâhk*—in the rambling municipality known in English as Edmonton and in Cree as *Amiskwacîwâskahikan*. *Amiskwacîwâskahikan* provides an example of how Cree names, *Nehiyawisiyîhkâsowina*, are mispronounced, anglicized, or changed by contact with mainstream society. The Terwillegar Oxbow, on the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* in *Amiskwacîwâskahikan*, lies at the western edge of a reserve established in 1884, of one *Nehiyaw* named Chief *Pâhpâsces* and his followers. The spelling of Papaschase reveals the anglicization of this *Nehiyawisiyîhkâsowin*. Such a rendering also tells of the difficulty in gleaning information from texts. The various ways to spell this Chief's name, including Papaschase, are *Papastew, Pâhpâstew,* and *Pâhpâsces*. *Pâhpâstew* means woodpecker in *Nehiyawewin*, and its diminutive, *Pâhpâsces* is a small species of woodpecker (Wolvengrey 2:612). My writing *Okimâhkân Pâhpâsces's* name, and the others for the various *Nehiyawak* living in Saskatchewan and Alberta, locates me here in *Amiskwacîwâskahikanihk* in western Canada, *Kisiskâciwani Sîpihk*. In spite of my Aboriginal heritage I stake no claim to indigeneity, *môya nitiyiniwin*.[3] But I can localize myself away from a misshapen

[3]I use the term Métis with some reservation to describe myself as a mixed blood descendant of Cree and Ojibway women and Orkney men employed by the Hudson's Bay Company. Fur trade historians distinguish Métis people with French paternal ancestry and Native maternal forbears from mixed descent people whose heritage arises from Anglo/Scots unions with Native women. See John E.

centre, in some weirdly, distant elsewhere. I was born here, very close to where the river turns left, where it bends north: *nikînihtâwikin ôta, metoni cîki isi namahcîhk, ôta kâwâkipayik kîwetinohk isi sîpiy*, otherwise known as the meeting place at the bend of the river (Cunningham 25), *kâwâkipayik ôma sîpiy, ekota kâkîmâmawipayihk aniki iyiniwak*, or Rossdale Flats. Now, I live about six miles south of the river on Papaschase's Reserve, *otiskonikan Pâhpâscase*, and not quite two miles east of the Terwillegar Oxbow, *nete, kotaki, ita sîpiy kâwâkamok*, there, at that other place, where the river curves.

Sadly, *Pâhpâscase* and his group held rights to the reserve for only a few short years. Joseph Dion tells us that the members of the Papaschase Reserve, No. 136, were particularly demoralized by the scrip outrage. Slightly more than 39 square miles covered *otiskonikan Pâhpâscase*, this land had been surveyed in 1884 as part of the terms of Treaty No. 6, signed at Fort Pitt and Fort Carleton in the fall of 1876. Dion explains further:

> In the summer of 1886, the year of the scrip issue in the west, some white man, "a friend of the Chief's," told him what he and all his head men, who looked more like half-breeds than Indians, should do. All they would require was the adoption of a name and the Métis scrip would be theirs with no trouble at all. Hence on July 22nd, 1886, Chief Papaschase, treaty ticket No.1, was discharged from treaty as "John Gladieu Quinn." (183)

The federal government imposed scrip in 1874 to settle Métis claims. Métis had to choose between two forms: land scrip or money scrip. Scrip was basically a

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Foster, "Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problem of Métis Roots," in Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 73-91 and Jennifer S.H. Brown, "Linguistic Solitudes and Changing Social Categories" in C.M. Judd and A.J. Ray, eds. *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 150-58.

certificate that entitled its bearer to a piece of "alienable land or its equivalent in cash" (Dickason 294). While the transition from "the Commons to Private Property" (O'Riordan 1) might have demonstrated the Hudson's Bay Company's ability to become more self-sufficient as it moved away from the fur trade and toward other profitable ventures such as farming, mining, and contractual labour, these drastic changes forced *Nehiyawak* and other *iyiniwak* to move away from their nomadic livelihoods to sedentary subsistence on reserves and obligatory restrictions on their traditions. Scrip led to even further legal divisions between Treaty Indians and Métis peoples in the late 1880s', a fact O'Riordan fails to take into account when crediting the Hudson's Bay Company with the ability to adapt to policies of private property and individual ownership:

> The national government's large-scale settlement scheme also created new opportunities for the HBC. New settlers and the growing population that would result from settlement could only increase the Company's revenue. It capitalised on the new demand for land by dividing its property into individual lots, which the HBC land commissioner sold to individuals who sought private property in the new western Canadian territory....The effect on the aboriginal population of the area was significant: not only did they face the loss of their resource base, but eventually they lost their support by the company in the form of contract labour, freighting, and provisioning. For the Indians of the Edmonton area, the loss of the commons was a double-edge sword. (21)

While scrip is not the focus of O'Riordan's argument, the Hudson's Bay Company was not necessarily forced to "adapt" to the notion of private property as it had, on 2 May 1670, bestowed upon the Governor and itself the status of "true and absolute Lordes and Proprietors" of "one of our Plantacions or Colonyes in America called *Ruperts Land*," a vast territory stretching from northern Québec to the Rocky

Mountains (Rich 139). The Hudson's Bay Company had long understood the benefits of proprietary corporate practices.

Most troubling of all in the scrip ignominy, as seen in the example of Chief *Pâhpâscase*, was that the "acceptance of scrip meant loss of entitlement to be registered as an Indian and exclusion from the Indian Act" (Dickason 294). Think about *tipiyawe musina'hikewin*, Dr. Anne Anderson's spelling, as the Cree translation of scrip (143). *Nehiyawak* use the verb *tipiyawewiho* to speak of owning property (Wolvengrey 1:225), *tipiyawe* as a pronoun meaning one's own or personal (Wolvengrey 1:225), and the noun *masinahikewin* to indicate a piece of paper, writing, a "debt" or "thing given on credit" (Wolvengrey 1:88). The Cree understanding of scrip, then, was "a piece of paper showing I own property." Giving up one's identity as an Indian to gain status as a landowner, including changing one's name to something in a colonial language, was one step in an imported hegemony leading to linguistic homogeneity and cultural loss. Indeed, many *Nehiyawak* in western Canada have Gladieu or Quinn as their surnames. Imagine yourself as a hunter forced to grow wheat, or as a seamstress reduced to cleaning toilets. Perhaps you were a great river navigator and are now relegated to a paddle boat on a manmade urban lake not far from *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*. The transition from nomadism to a sedentary subsistence must certainly have been culture shock in the extreme. I write the name *Pâhpâscase* to right his name and tell his story because my learning his history coincides with my learning Cree, and because I live on a 650 square foot of space on his reserve. I have worked for several years as a historical interpreter at Fort Edmonton Park, so close to the Terwillegar Oxbow you can paddle there in

twenty minutes; the Park introduces visitors to the history of Edmonton from its beginnings as a fur trading centre run by the Hudson's Bay Company, through the settlement period, and into the agricultural era of the twentieth century when Alberta became a province and Edmonton its capital. The settlement period, labelled 1885 Street in the Park, omits *Pâhpâscase's* story—*otâcimowin Pâhpâscase*—and what the transition from the commons to private property meant for him and his people. Indeed, only recently have I learned this history, and suspect that most interpreters at Fort Edmonton Park do not know it, leading at least one visitor to tell me he perceived the Park as an "amusement park." Such a story has a Cree version as well as an English account, and I should temper my criticism of Park interpreters because many over the years have expressed an abiding excitement for history and an enduring sensitivity to cultural issues.

This thesis articulates a deeply personal exploration I embarked on five years ago, when I registered for my first Cree language class. Very much like setting off on a long canoe odyssey, *ekîsipwecimeyân mâka ekîpetâpoyân*, and in another way like maneuvering the unpredictable waters of a two-foot ledge on *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*, my journey continues. Unless I tell people otherwise, they see a white woman when they look at me. Why would a white woman pursue such an intimidating task with the fervour and energy that I have? The simple answer is a strange family irony. My father, a white man, spoke Cree because he grew up at Frog and Fishing Lakes, and my mother, a woman of Native lineage, does not speak Cree for a host of reasons, most importantly because of a theft of our story. I feel a deep cultural loss on so many levels: not only is my knowledge of my Aboriginal heritage limited, I know very little

about my Scottish background or even my English ancestry. Adjusting the angle of my canoe so that I can read the surface of the river more clearly, however, I have a starting place in my own family. My thinking on Dr. Harland's advice and in particular my experiences studying *Nehiyawewin* have led me to turn my question around the way a river oxbow curves in on itself; I decided that if my father spoke a marginalized Indigenous language then I should learn it to understand him and our story better. I have since concluded that I would now ask the question differently, because I was once approached by a visitor at Fort Edmonton Park who presented me with the term "cultural contamination," and I realize that the phrasing of my original question could connote such a posture. The term this man verbalized still causes me considerable discomfort, as it harkens back to ugliness in human history with false notions of racial purity. I now ask not why marginalized people should learn to speak a colonial tongue at the risk of all things outlandish leaking into Indigenous cultures. Rather, how can I, a member of the so-called mainstream, explain just a few of the insights I gained of an Indigenous worldview so exceptional the experience feels like what a sixteen-foot canoe does in *misi pâwisitikw*—the Grand Rapids of the North Saskatchewan River as it spills into *wînipekohk sâkahikanihk*—Lake Winnipeg? Indeed, when I asked Dr. Harland for permission to include my question and his response here he reminded me of Margaret Atwood's poem, "Marsh Languages," a contemplation of how the colonizer's language has consumed Indigenous ways of communicating wisdom. Atwood explicates the problem in quite pessimistic and unfortunately realistic terms:

Translation was never possible.
Instead there was always only
conquest, the influx
of the language of hard nouns,
the language of metal,
the language of either/or,
the one language that has eaten all the others. (25-31)

While Atwood does not identify the voracious speech in "Marsh Languages," many would point to English as the culprit. Certainly, other European colonizers speaking other European languages undermined and continue to erode Indigenous languages world wide, but it is a very sad fact that many Westerners who live and work in other parts of the world to teach English as a second language are perhaps unwitting participants in what Wade Davis calls an unprecedented "wave of acculturation and assimilation, in which peoples all over the Earth are being drawn away from their past" (13).

Acculturation and assimilation might, in the words of my interlocutor at Fort Edmonton Park, be paraphrased as cultural contamination, and while Davis acknowledges the ethnocentricity of every culture and its ardent "loyalty to its own interpretation of reality" as a way of avoiding the "madness and anarchy" of a human imagination running amok (15), I hear a certain curiosity in conversation as thoughtful deliberators aspire to move beyond the confines of their own limited experience. This urge to understand difference and resemblance accounts for my

efforts in studying *Nehiyawewin* and in considering how I am "other" to those beyond my understanding.

My mother admonishes me occasionally for my ruminations on race, for I have become acutely aware of complexion as I study *Nehiyawewin*. I am especially conscious of my whiteness, and having theorized colour in graduate English courses, the privilege of my pallor disturbs me. Not only has learning another language upset my canoe and sent me head first over a waterfall, such questions as these have concerned me in recent years. Is it a coincidence that I am both white and educated, my academic achievements giving me many economic advantages over others without these blessings? To what extent do being a person of colour and being marginalized concur? How do I reconcile my experiences in the realm of academia where I daily count my blessings, the world of the prison where I teach creative writing, public transit and inner city streets, or the evocative environs of my family? How do I take what I hear in classes at the Faculty of Native Studies or the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta and translate that to my family? We speak a different language in the scholarly surroundings of higher learning, and its various divisions lug around trunks full of rhetoric. How do I navigate the rapids of such persuasive though sometimes dubious discourse to get to the safety of calm waters and share what I have heard in language that is understandable to those beyond the margins of academic privilege? And finally, how can I make sense of all these questions while working through the bemusement of learning a second language?

I title this introduction "*Awa Wâpanacâhkos ekwa Awa Wakinâkanak*: The Morning Star and the Tamarack" as a metaphor for the strength of my family, to whom I dedicate this thesis, for our fierce resolve in surviving the trials and triumphs of our own story. *Wâpanacâhkos* is the Morning Star, or *oskîsik Kisemanitow*,[4] twinkling just before the first rays of light whisper the dawn, and *Wakinâkanak* are tamarack trees standing in a tenacious circle holding fast to our story, for we are a family first, before a culture.

This creative Master of Arts thesis in English takes the form of prose and poetry because *nikîpetâpoyin*, I came this way by canoe. My prose writing consists of essays that articulate my thinking on language and land, while my poetry speaks of logic and love, lineage and lyricism. I choose both genres because I have yet to become fluent, *ninohtenihtânehiyawân*, need my prosaic English to elaborate on the more difficult aspects of language and cultural trauma, and I offer poetry to facilitate a conversation between a traditionally oral aesthetic and a written rendition of history and story. My study includes four sections, each with its own focussed essays and poems: Mother Tongue—*ninîkihikwak opîkiskwewiniwâw*—, Father Tongue—*nohtâwiy opîkiskwewin*—, Language Family—*ewîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwewin*—, and Speech Acts—*tânisi kakîwîcipîkiskwemitoyâhk ekwa kakîmiyohtwâyâhk*, followed by a conclusion. These section titles serve as metaphors for the different ways that monolingualism, bilingualism, and second language learning affect our lives, and what it means to speak as a means of communicating our individual and collective experiences. *Ninîkihikwak opîkiskwewiniwâw* will include both a history of the term "mother tongue" and prose and poetry that consider *Nehiyawewin* as a

[4] God's Eye

mother tongue to many *Nehiyawak*, a mother tongue to my maternal ancestors, a second language to my father, and a history of the term "mother tongue." I write also about an interesting grammatical feature, gender, in *Nehiyawewin,* how this compares to English, and include an essay about the corruption of a beautiful Cree word for woman—*iskwew*.

*Nohtâwiy opîkiskwewin* honours the memory of my father—*nohtâwiy*—and his work with *Nehiyawak* and other Aboriginal people. I tell the story of him sharing a hospital room with the late Dr. Harold Cardinal. As a student of *Nehiyawewin* I am fascinated by how differently I must experience the world and contemplate truth when choosing words and phrases to convey meaning. *Nehiyawewin* is both a highly verbal and a richly polysynthetic language, meaning that the verb provides the central nervous system of the language as polysynthesis offers syntactic sinew to organize meaning. I dispute stereotypical conclusions about *Nehiyawewin* and other Indigenous languages as inferior to dominant tongues, and point to a number of recent works that confirm *Nehiyawewin* as an inimitable means of communication worthy of preserving and promoting. I offer poems in tribute to my Dad—*awa nâpew ekîpakaskît mâka ekîpônipimâtisit*—that man, the one who spoke Cree so brilliantly, but who has sadly passed on. He learned Cree in a dramatically different way than I now do, and just because his first language was English does not make him a colonizer. He was, in fact, very much the opposite.

Chapter Three, *ewîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwewin*, explores the meaning of my family's story, both historically and currently. I share how *Nehiyawewin* has influenced our family and how, like many Indigenous languages Cree suffers a lack

of teaching materials. I ponder other Aboriginal writers' perspectives on language and include a couple of cultural narratives to explain how as a family we have navigated the challenges of being in-between *Nehiyawisîhcikewin ekwa Môniyawîhtwâwin*—Cree culture and white culture. I offer a number of poems to articulate my experience learning *Nehiyawewin*.

In Chapter Four, *tânisi kakîwîcipîkiskwemitoyâhk ekwa kakîmiyohtwâyâhk*, I esteem *Mistahi Maskwa's*—Big Bear's—1885 courtroom speech through the lens of speech act theory. I deliberate over certain aspects of the court documents that reveal the farce that was *Mistahi Maskwa's* trial. I share my experience of hearing Big Bear's granddaughter—*otâniskotâpân Mistahi Maskwa*—Yvonne Johnson speak at the University of Alberta in April 2004, and how I hear her story as resounding with speech act theory as well. I include a discussion about recent speech act theorists, ruminations on what it means to transform an oral language into written form, and how we must overcome the differences between orality and literacy to stave off language death. I offer "*Kâh-kîhtwâm*" to assert the necessity of kinship and repetition as means to familial and linguistic vitality.

Comparing and contrasting a recent speech act my mother experienced to David Ahenakew's violent speech act in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on 13 December 2002, I contemplate the damage these performances enact on cross-cultural relations in Canada. Considering the moral responsibilities of human verbal communication, articulating our deepest anger poses a labyrinth of obstacles to both speaker and listener. Writing affords us the time to plan and organize our thoughts, whereas speech often combusts spontaneously from a visceral place hidden within. What led a

woman to offend my mother or Mr. Ahenakew to utter his curses? How do we manage verbal cruelty?

Revisiting why writing and speaking are both important in preserving *Nehiyawewin* as a living language my conclusion argues that writing and speech do interact with each other, even if in a most tenuous compromise, because they must for *Nehiyawewin* to survive. Whether or not writing is a solely colonial imposition is a question worthy of further study, but for now the reality is that writing and literacy, like them or not, are part of the colonial arsenal. If it takes writing to convince mainstream society that *Nehiyawewin*, or any Indigenous language, is equally valid and truthful as English, or any colonial tongue, then writing must become a part of the colonized's repository of strategies for linguistic and cultural survival. I hear this dialogue as a mightily optimistic conversation. Let's have hope! *Pakoseyimotân!*

**The Young Linguist**

A girl, perhaps five,
whose father will later tell me she speaks
English, French, and Armenian,
approaches me at Fort Edmonton Park.
"How do you say 'Hi,' in the teepee way?"
she asks. Near the entrance
to the Indian Trade Store, guarded
by a six-sided stronghold, fortified
by twenty-foot bulwarks, and four
towering, aloof bastions, we regard
each other. I crouch down.
"Around here," I reply, "the Cree say,
'*Tân'si*,' or if you want to say,
'Hello, how are you?'
we say, '*Tân'si kîya*?' "[5]

[5] McIlwraith, Naomi, "The Young Linguist." *Stroll of Poets Anthology 2007* (Edmonton: Stroll of Poets Society, 2007) 56.

**Trademark Translation**

"Dad," I ask,
enthralled by the irony of our identity,
"How would you say, 'My wife is Métis,' in Cree?"
Without hesitation, with skin
as pale as mine, Dad looks straight into my eyes,
the colour of the North Saskatchewan sky,
says with the ease and contraction of a fluent speaker,
*"Nit'skwem ap'sis nehiyaw."*
He knows I understand, knows Mom doesn't.
Then despite hair white and downy as a whisper,
twenty-one, a young man again,
he ducks his head and turns toward Mom, his eyes
the colour of the aspen parkland in autumn,
hers the colour of warm Saskatchewan loam.
He looks into them to translate with his trademark grin,
"My woman is a little bit Cree."[6]

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[6] McIlwraith, Naomi, "Trademark Translation." *Stroll of Poets Anthology 2006* (Edmonton: Stroll of Poets Society, 2006) 55.

*ninîkihikwak opîkiskwewiniwâw*
**Chapter One: Mother Tongue**

***Paskwâhk* – On the Prairie**

Why is it called Seneca root? Why, for so long, have I only known it as Seneca root? When will I learn to see it on the prairie? Will there be any prairie left to even look for Seneca root? Who brought this name—Seneca root—forward? As Grandma pulled that Seneca root on the wild Saskatchewan grassland surrounding Bank End which is, by the way, on the map but not in the dictionary, she knew what it was good for but did she know it as Seneca root or as *mînisihkes*? She was born too late to witness the stamping, steaming, heavy breathing, massive, mammal-smelling buffalo, but did she know the Cree called them *paskwâwimostoswak*? Did she taste *paskwâwimostosowiyâs* growing up there on that boundless plain? If the prairie is called *paskwâwi*, a cow *mostosw*, and a buffalo *paskwâwimostosw*—prairie cow—which came first, the buffalo, the cow, or the prairie? Does it really matter? *Ehâ!* Yes, because if Grandma didn't know the word for grandma—*nôhkom*—and buffalo—*paskwâwimostosw*—that's where it started. Or ended. Why do I have to look up Seneca root in the English-Cree dictionary to find *mînisihkes* and then again on the internet to find out what it's good for? What disguises itself as twisted coincidence in my sore throat and sneezing this cold February morning as I ponder this? Wasn't Seneca some Greek sophist, and if a snake in Cree is *kinepikw* and Seneca root is also known as snake root, how on God's good green ground did a Roman rhetorician end up on the Saskatchewan prairie—*paskwâhk*—in Plains Cree country—*paskwâwiyinînâhk*—where the Plains Cree—*paskwâwiyiniwak*—spoke, speak the Plains Cree language—*epaskwâwinîmocik*? How many of the Plains Cree people

spoke Ojibwe—*nahkawiyinimowin*—or Assiniboine—*pwâsîmowin*. *Tân'tahto aniki paskwâwiyiniwak kânehiyawicik ekînahkawiyinimocik ahpô ekîpwâsîmocik*? How did the big, open prairie—*paskwâyâw*—become so unilingually, monolingually unknowing? *Tân'si môya ehisikiskeyimâcik opîtatowewak aniki iyiniwak?* And how is it that I've finally come to realize—to hear—how *ekîkiskeyimâcik*—they knew them—sounds so very much like *ekîkisteyimâcik*—they held them in high regard? Wouldn't that have been a better history? If we really know each other then we can really respect each other: *kîspin tâpwe kiskeyimitoyahki tâpwe kakahkîkisteyimitoyahk*. Why do I learn at 43, and not at 23 or 13, that Grandma's grandparents were Ojibwa? Are some stories that hard to tell? Was Grandma Cree? Ojibwa? White? *Ehâ, ekwa ekîhôhkomiyân ekwa ekînihtâmônahicepihket*.

**Translation**
*mînisihkes* – snake root, Seneca root
*paskwâwimostoswak* – buffalo (plural)
*paskwâwimostowiyâs* – buffalo meat
*paskwâwi* – prairie
*mostosw* – cow
*paskwâwimostosw* – buffalo (singular)
*Ehâ!* – Yes!
*nôhkom* – Grandma
*kinepikw* – snake
*paskwâhk* – on the prairie
*paskwâwiyinînâhk* – in Plains Cree country
*paskwâwiyiniwak* – Plains Indians
*epaskwâwinîmocik* – they speak the Plains Cree language
*nahkawiyinimowin* – the Ojibwe language
*pwâsîmowin* – the Assiniboine language
*Tân'tahto aniki paskwâwiyiniwak kânehiyawicik ekînahkawiyinimocik ahpô ekîpwâsîmocik*? – How many of those Plains Indians, the ones who were Cree, spoke Ojibwa or Assiniboine?
*paskwâyâw* – the prairie
*Tân'si môya e-isî-kiskeyimâcik opîtatowewak aniki iyiniwak?* – How did the Europeans not know the Indians?
*ekîkiskeyimâcik* – they knew them
*ekîkisteyimâcik* – they held them in high regard

*kîspin tâpwe kiskeyimitoyahki tâpwe kakahkîkisteyimitoyahk.* – If we truly know each other we can truly respect each other.
*Ehâ, ekîhôhkomiyân ekwa ekînihtâmônahicepihket.* – Yes, and she was my Grandma and she was good at pulling *mînisihkes*.

Five years ago, in my first Cree language class, a fellow student argued a compelling position: the Cree language is supposed to be spoken; when you write it down you steal it. A young man less than thirty years old, his father was Siksika and his mother a *Nehiyaw-iskwew*. Peter[7] spoke in English, not knowing Cree and his statement lodged itself in my mind, nudging me ever since. This is how it might look and sound in *Nehiyawewin*: *kakînehiyawipîkiskweyâhk osâm kîspin nehiyawasinahikeyâhki ehotinamâsoyâhk.* Marianne Mithun, a linguist from the University of California, explains the strikingly similar perspective of her Indigenous language informants:

> some community members feel that "reducing the language to writing" would do violence to it, destroying its integrity and strength. There are fears that once it is written, this most intimate cultural inheritance will no longer be uniquely theirs but, like so many other aspects of their heritage, become accessible to any passerby, people who may not accord it appropriate respect (185).

These arguments point clearly both to the predicaments that Indigenous-language speakers grapple with in trying to stave off language loss and the divisions imposed on tribal peoples as a result of domination. When I commit letters to the page in writing Cree words, do I steal from *Nehiyawak*? Some will say so. Let me speak of my solidarity with you, I reply. I offer my poems and this thesis to you, *kîyawâw kânehiyawiyek*—those of you who are Cree—as my way of sharing your concerns about your language and culture, and to those of you who are not Cree but whose

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[7] I have paraphrased him and changed his name, because I was not able to locate him for permission to quote him directly.

curiosity may be roused by my introduction. My entry into *Nehiyawewin* and Cree culture, *Nehiyawisîhcikewin* coincides with my introduction to the Aboriginal history of Canada, the racism and sexism of the *Consolidated Indian Act of 1876*, the many more problems than solutions posed by Bill C-31, and the role of residential schools in quelling the mystical sounds of *Nehiyawewin* and other Native languages. Perhaps most importantly however, on a heartrendingly personal level, I came to appreciate and respect my father in a way I was far too tardy in realizing. I failed somehow to apprehend both his gentle spirit and how his immersion in *Nehiyawisîhcikewin* as a child might account for this. *Ekîpakaskît* is such a beautiful way to describe my father and his facility in *Nehiyawewin*: he spoke Cree brightly. Unfortunately, he had little reason to speak Cree to his children in a city, in a province, in a region of Canada dominated by the English language. Surely the most vivid detail, and the very reason for this thesis, is the situation where my maternal ancestors were Cree, though Mom does not speak Cree and neither did Grandma, and my late father, a *mônîyâw*, spoke Cree so brilliantly.

A little over two years ago, when I brought Mom and Dad over to my Cree class to introduce this amazing pair to my Cree instructor and my classmates, the teacher spoke to Dad in Cree. The one word that has remained with me is *pimâtisiwin*, which means life, and I guessed that the instructor asked Dad about Cree culture or the Cree way of life. Despite how his youth so profoundly shaped his life, Dad rarely spoke of his experiences growing up with the Cree of Frog and Fishing Lakes, Alberta. Hence my surprise when he responded to the instructor's question: "When I moved to Edmonton at the age of fourteen it took me a year to get over the

culture shock." I had never considered what it would have been like for him, a white teenager who had assimilated to Cree culture, to try to live in an English-speaking mainstream after spending nearly a decade of his youth on a reserve in pre-World War I conditions. I wondered why Dad now chose to reply in English to the instructor's question, and have since concluded he did so for my sake, knowing my limited comprehension of *Nehiyawewin*. While his skin colour tempered the blow of migration to the city, the cultural mores within which he had been raised would have undoubtedly conflicted with those of the dominant society. My father, did, in fact, work with Cree-speaking people for much of his adult life, including his role as an orderly at the Aberhart Sanitarium for patients with tuberculosis in the 1960s, and his buying and selling used furniture from and to a predominantly Cree clientele during the 1980s and 1990s.

*Pimâtisiwin*—life. *Pimâtisiw*—he or she lives. *Pâpimâtisiyiwa nohtâwiy otahcahkwa ôma masinahikewinihk*. My father's spirit lives on in this thesis.

Linguists speak in metaphors, such as language family, mother tongue, daughter language, and language death, when discussing the diversity of human verbal communication. Norman Denison objects to this, and presents an unsettlingly dismissive view on language loss:

> Anthropomorphic metaphors do not fit language well, but if one uses them, "language suicide" suggests itself as an alternative to "language death".
>
> In the stage preceding their disappearance, doomed languages often display a considerable degree of structural and material replacement as a consequence of socially conditioned influence from more vigorous rivals. Evidence is adduced to suggest that this is hardly of itself a cause of demise, and if it is in part describable as "rule loss" this seems to be fortuitous. More typically, the direct cause of "language death" is seen to be social and psychological: parents cease transmitting the language

in question to their offspring. (22)

Denison, displaying considerable philistinism, chooses the safer, easier path of blaming the victim and according the "more vigorous rivals" far more than their share of credit. I have learned just how grueling learning an Indigenous language is, in my fourth and fifth decades; indeed, even the writing, revising, and completing of this thesis has demanded of me far more than I expected. This is the hard path, the unbeaten trail that I cannot circumvent, as opposed to a route less strewn with obstacles, the one that says, "What's the use? Languages inevitably die and if only those who spoke the language would pull up their socks." Denison's argument is like a kick in the teeth, of an Indigenous-language speaker, with a steel-toed boot. Nettle and Romaine dispute Denison's case:

> People do not kill themselves on a whim. Suicide is indicative of mental and often physical illness brought about by undue stress. Likewise, people do not fling away their languages for no good reason....language shift and language death occur under duress and stressful social circumstances, where there is no realistic choice but to give in. Many people stop speaking their languages out of self-defense as a survival strategy. (6)

We of the majority fail to recognize the privilege of speaking a dominant language. While our languages reveal so much about us and what we have inherited, the legacy of language seems ironically visceral and ineffable at the same time, as speaking is a physical deed that conveys the intangible activities of our thoughts. Our families, especially and ideally our parents, provide the most productive means of developing verbal intelligence in our early years. This is why family and life metaphors serve so well as descriptors for the vitality and fertility of human communication. When something threatens these birthrights, such as the spreading ubiquity of English, the insidiousness of the phenomenon baffles humanity because we cannot seem to see it

happening. If only we would listen hard—*nâkatohketân*—perhaps we could hear it happening.[8] The more I learn about *Nehiyawewin*, the more I hear its beauty and revelation: *nâkatohkawew*, surprisingly similar to *nâkatohketân*, is a verb describing a person who takes care of someone. Inherent in the verb *nâkatohketân*—listen hard—is the concept of attending closely, protecting someone we love deeply. *kîspin nâkatohkeyahki Nehiyawewin, kânâkatohkâtamahk*: if we listen closely to *Nehiyawewin*, we care for it. This feels like a parent's love.

Technically, most fluent speakers learn their first language in the home, from their parents. The term mother tongue implies the mother's potential for influencing her children's speech-learning more than the father, at least in the early years of mother tongue acquisition, though this is not always the case. Einar Haugen outlines a three-stage history of the expression mother tongue, observing that 1100 A.D. seems to be the era of its first attestation in Europe, and that in the Middle Ages the term distinguished the mother's vernacular speech from the father's Latin eloquence: "there seems no doubt that the first uses of *lingua materna* were rather more pejorative than favorable" (76). In the later Middle Ages, mother tongue experienced a rise in its regard to the extent that all the Romance languages established corresponding expressions, and Haugen suggests that because of this mother tongue may originate in Latin rather than German. With the Renaissance and the Reformation, it seems that mother tongue entered a second stage and became the voice of God as writers such as the reformer Wycliffe boldly made such assertions as this in 1380: "Secler lordys schuld, in defawte of prelatys, lerne and preche þe law of

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[8] I acknowledge Dorothy Thunder for clarifying the meaning of *nâkatohketân* for me: "Listen very carefully and pay very special attention. It's not just listening, but more in depth."

God in here modyr tonge" (OED 1127). Mother tongue crossed into a third phase during the Romantic era as the need for an educated laity increased and the standard languages of individual countries articulated their aspirations for nationhood (Haugen 79). Poets and other writers expressed the desires of commoners in the mother tongue and "it became a point of honor to promote and care for the folk language in country after country" (Haugen 82).

Indigenous-language speakers in Canada often refer to their first language as their mother tongue. While difficult to prove, it is plausible that the term mother tongue came with the Europeans as Aboriginals may not have needed to distinguish their first languages until their interlopers arrived. Certainly, in many areas of the western hemisphere there are large areas of tremendous linguistic diversity, but the European history of the phrase seems to merge with contact in the so-called New World.

I use mother tongue in an ironic way as the title for this chapter because while English—*Âkayâsîmowin*—is my first language, *Nehiyawewin*, the language of least some of my maternal ancestors, was also my father's second language. Even though it was not his mother tongue, Dad spoke *kayâs Nehiyawewin*, the Old Cree, earning great respect from most of the *Nehiyawak* he worked with and awe from many others. Contradictory though this may seem, *Nehiyawewin* is, in a way, my mother tongue because my maternal ancestors spoke it, at least my Cree maternal ancestors, *aniki wâhkômâkanak kâkînehiyawecik*, those ancestors, the ones who spoke Cree. Dr. Anne Anderson's *Metis Cree Dictionary* glosses mother tongue as *ninêkê'kwak opêkis'wewiniwâw*, "my parent's language."

The language debate in Canada has focussed mainly on the divisions between English and French, since Confederation. Aboriginal Canadians have, however, in recent decades begun to articulate their own desires for linguistic freedom as they hear fewer and fewer of their people speak their Native languages and watch as more and more participate in the dominant culture's practices, which means speaking one of our nation's national languages—English or French. Shirley Heath points to Antonio de Nebrija, in *Gramática sobre la lengua castellana* (1492), who assented with Spain's Queen Isabella in saying, "language is the perfect instrument of empire" (Heath 6). Indeed, as Linda Cardinal tells us language politics intensified with Pierre Elliott Trudeau's leadership:

> For Trudeau, whose aim was to fight any manifestation of nationalism in Québec, English and French needed to become the cornerstone of the country's approach to citizenship. Nationhood, citizenship and language would be linked in ways still unaccounted for. More, specifically, as a nation, Canada would be defined by its two official languages, English and French, whose purpose, …, would be to unite the country into one political community (483).

J.R. Miller provides a compelling account of the history of nation-builders and proselytizers as complicit partners in the forced assimilation of Canadian Indians to colonial society, in his book *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. Colonial authorities and missionary organizations implemented a number of policies in their effort to "civilize" the Indians, including residential schools as an effective environment to educate Natives in Eurocolonial ways. Indeed, only very recently have Aboriginal Canadians and some churches begun to meet to reconcile some of these injustices. That the *Legacy of Hope Foundation* should produce a book and documentary on this history from an Aboriginal perspective, titled *Where Are the*

*Children? Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools*, in 2003, only seven years after Miller's publication, should come as no surprise, given the degree to which language suppression is entangled with the cultural and social ills arising from removing Native children from their families and forcing them to reside in schools so foreign to their experience.

Miller argues that the prohibition of Indigenous languages in these schools is the most notorious example of the civilizing process:

> The most prominent – certainly the best remembered – of the means that schools used to try to bring about these changes was an assault on traditional Aboriginal practices, in particular the use of Native languages. As early as the 1850s the state had insisted that missionaries such as the Jesuits, who were evangelizing on Manitoulin Island, use only English in their schools. (199)

While the Oblates and the Anglican Church Missionary Society received direction from their superiors to learn the languages of those Natives they worked with in the late 1800s, Indian Affairs increased their demands that missionaries use only English. The government pressured Methodist missionaries, too, to use only English in the schools they ran in Alberta. These policies led to fewer missionaries gaining skill in Aboriginal language and, as Miller contends, this was "both effect and cause of increasing pressure in the schools to end the children's use of Aboriginal languages" (200).

Consider what a young child experienced as he was removed from his family and sent to a school where he was prohibited from speaking his mother tongue. Forced to think, speak, and act in English, this Indigenous child was a victim of a purposeful agenda aimed not merely at civilizing him, but at undermining his personhood and nationhood. Calling this what it is, mind control, while provocative,

seems only appropriate. Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, past president of the American Psychological Association says this of mind control:

> I conceive of mind control as a phenomenon encompassing all the ways in which personal, social, and institutional forces are exerted to induce compliance, conformity, belief, attitude, and value change in others. (http://zimbardo.socialpsychology.org/)

Theorists have long argued about which exerts more influence on the other, language or thought. The rigours of learning *Nehiyawewin* have taught me the radical departure from English thought necessary for me to achieve even a modicum of skill in another language, particularly an Aboriginal language that articulates reality so differently from my first language. Zimbardo's criteria for mind control aptly describe the residential school phenomenon, especially because forcing an Indigenous child to speak a colonial language is the same as forcing the child to think in the colonial language. In identifying a "community of consciousness" that is the "cement of the nation," Pierre Bourdieu incriminates the educational system as colluding with the state in the "construction, legitimation and imposition of an official language" (48). Georges Davy also points to the schoolmaster for his role as a "*maître à parler* (teacher of speaking)" and as a "*maître à penser* (teacher of thinking)," because the teacher dictates the very expression and thought of his charges to "build the common consciousness of the nation" (qtd. in Bourdieu 48-49). While Bourdieu and Davy consider the standardization of children's linguistic and intellectual development in the context of French state authority, the attempt to regiment the language and thought of Aboriginal children in Canada has resulted in arguably deeper cultural trauma because of the very foreignness of the European institution of education.

In 1944 Raphael Lemkin coined the term cultural genocide:

> Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups....
>
> Genocide has two phases: one destruction for the national pattern of the oppressed groups; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. (79)

Genocide is a harsh and complicated term to use in everyday conversation because it seems not well known that it involves actions other than the wholesale slaughter of one group. *The Crime of Genocide*, a United Nations Convention Aimed at Preventing Destruction of Groups and at Punishing Those Responsible, ratified on 9 December 1948, delineates five categories of genocide, one that points ominously in the direction of Canadian residential schools:

> A. Killing members of the group;
> B. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
> C. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
> D. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
> E. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
>
> (United Nations Office of Public Information 6)

Forcing Aboriginal children away from their families and into residential schools qualifies as a genocidal practice. Colonial governments, churches, and residential school survivors have been discussing the terms of a resolution and compensation for victims for some years, but sadly, there are stories of people claiming to be victims when they were not. In their duplicity they cripple the very core of forgiveness and healing necessary to these discussions. One way they do this is by heightening the

suspicion of a non-Aboriginal public that most needs to understand this ugly era in Canadian history. While extremely difficult to discuss and write about, residential schools as a culturally genocidal practice are clearly relevant to potential linguicide and Aboriginal peoples quest for cultural and linguistic liberty.

Language death has occurred and remains a threat all over the western hemisphere and in many parts of the world. Marianne Mithun, specializing in Central Pomo, a Native American language spoken north of San Francisco, California, laments the tragedy of language loss:

> Language represents the most creative, pervasive aspect of culture, the most intimate side of the mind. The loss of language diversity will mean that we will never even have the opportunity to appreciate the full creative capacities of the human mind. (189)

I agree with Mithun, but if I were to speak this way to those closest to me, those outside of academia, I would fail to articulate the specific disasters of language loss. While rudimentary linguistic analysis of *Nehiyawewin* has enhanced my understanding of the language and the culture, my lack of fluency tells the real tale of my limited experience with *Nehiyawisîhcikewin*. When I hear the whispers of an elder's prayer to *Kisemanitow*, I can only reach for a word here or there. Considerable thought has led me to conclude that language acquisition follows a somewhat meandering river, a waterway not entirely a straight line but one that is logical: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and in that order. To be sure, there is extensive overlap, but especially in the early years of language acquisition children learn first by listening and watching before they speak (Berger and Thompson 238). If I were a language teacher I would priorize listening over speaking, speaking over reading, and reading over writing. Controversial though this may seem, I cannot fail

to recognize the telling contradiction of declining numbers of Aboriginal-language speakers just as more texts in these threatened languages are produced. To explain, I acknowledge the necessity of many texts and the information they provide on Indigenous languages and their fragile role in preserving these vital forms of human communication. But the irony, in Cree, Ojibwe, and many other Aboriginal Canadian languages is that often these texts emerged from missionary efforts to proselytize. Some missionaries achieved great things, becoming fluent in one or more Aboriginal languages, but what effect did this have on those languages? If modern Aboriginal people study these manuscripts in their quest for fluency, what insights into their culture will they gain, especially interpretations filtered through the potentially clouded perceptions of missionaries? What Cree words have we retained in these texts and what Cree words have we lost in a declining Cree-speaking populace? I and several of my classmates have heard the criticism that Cree learned at university is not "real." Cree speakers distinguish between the old Cree, *kayâs Nehiyawewin*, and the newfangled Cree taught in schools. Unfortunately, this perspective undermines the important efforts of Indigenous language teachers who are no less passionate about protecting and promoting their languages and cultures.

What, *exactly*, would the death of *Nehiyawewin* mean, for *Nehiyawak*, other Aboriginal Canadians, and non-Aboriginal Canadians? What creative capacities does *Nehiyawewin* express, and what have we lost already? What if Cree is one of the most robust Indigenous languages in Canada? Does this suggest that *Nehiyawewin* or *Nehiyawak* dominate other Aboriginal languages and cultures, or that *Nehiyawak* had the advantages of geography to transmit their language? Speaking of language loss in

abstractions, fanciful, or philosophical terms is not enough to describe the tragedy. No matter how hard we struggle to define culture, language, creative capacity, cultural acumen, or any of the many ways we try to educate non-linguists or non-speakers of threatened languages, we must define the problem in as precise terms as we can muster. Stories; poetry; history; healing; medicine; music; science; stars and their mythologies; stars and how they guide us; how we read the land, a river, and other signs on the ground, in the air, on the snow, on the ice, on the prairie, in the aspen parkland, in the forest, on the lake, in the bark, in plants; women's words; men's words; prayers; lamentations; incantations; medicine men's words; medicine women's words; phrases for love and anger and hope; expressions that children use; declarations that adolescents utter: all these we risk losing if we lose Cree, and these we have lost with those Aboriginal languages that have already succumbed to various diseases, wars, and oppressions throughout history, and yielded to the modernizing, globalizing impulses of today.

One of the mysteries to have broadened my awareness of the scenery around me is how while some individual words can be directly converted from one language to another, concepts are more often difficult to translate. One of my Cree instructors used to say that the "essence" was lost when he translated certain ideas from Cree to English. This has led to me to think about how much we actually lose in transferring thoughts from an Indigenous language to a colonial language. Jean Okimâsis, former director of the Department of Indian Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, University of Regina explains how signage in Saskatchewan has distorted the Cree language. There are five dialects of Cree

spoken in Canada: Swampy Cree or the "n" dialect, Woods Cree or the "th" dialect, Attikamek Cree or the "r" dialect, Moose Cree or the "l" dialect, and Plains Cree or the "y" dialect. Because the Swampy, Woods, and Plains Cree dialects are spoken in the province, Cree place names abound in Saskatchewan, on the signs of towns, villages, cities, streets, lakes, rivers, and landmarks (Okimâsis 23). In the early decades of missionary activity in western Canada, Europeans learning Cree used their best interpretation of the sounds as they heard them and the most familiar orthography available to record the language. Leaving the historical debate about syllabics aside for now, it has become clear that the English spelling system cannot accurately document *Nehiyawewin*, an Algonquian language so fundamentally foreign to English and its parent, the Indo-European language family. In recent decades, *aniki Nehiyawak kânehiyawecik*—those Cree people, the ones who speak *Nehiyawewin*—and linguists have developed the Standard Roman Orthography, SRO, to represent the sounds of Cree. Okimâsis provides a number of revealing examples of how writing the Cree words for various place names using an English spelling system distorts them and explains how SRO achieves a more accurate denotation.

*Nehiyawewin* has ten consonants, three short vowels, and four long vowels, requiring only fourteen of the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet to represent them. There are a number of sounds and sound combinations never used in *Nehiyawewin*, such as b,d,f,g,j,q,u,v,x, and z and ch, sh, ng, aa, etc. (Okimâsis 24). Many words contain several diacritical markings, an important feature of SRO in signifying the long vowels of Cree. For example, several Cree words can be classified as "minimal pairs," "two words which are identical in pronunciation except for one

sound" (Okimâsis and Ratt 5). Diacritical markings, or macrons, over vowels indicate a lengthening of the vowel sound to distinguish its meaning from another word with the same spelling. Other minimal pairs differ in the sound of a certain consonant. The following list provides a few examples:

| | |
|---|---|
| *sâkahikan* – a lake | *sakahikan* – a nail |
| *nîyânan* – five | *nîyanân* – we |
| *môniyâw* – a white person | *sôniyâw* – money |
| *mâci* – begin/start | *maci* – evil/bad |
| *mâcî* – to go hunting | *macî* – isn't that so? |
| *kisitew* – it is hot | *kîsitew* – it is cooked |
| *nipiy* – water | *nîpiy* – a leaf |

(Okimâsis and Ratt 5, Okimâsis 25)

The untrained ear can easily mishear or misinterpret these sounds, leading to potentially small and large misunderstandings. Cree prosody, explains Okimâsis, "is the stress or intonation pattern" of the Cree language (26). To illustrate this she writes Cree prosody as kree PRAH-suh-dee. She suggests that in the same way English speakers have difficulty pronouncing many Cree words because we use a different stress pattern, so to do Cree speakers "have some very distinct versions of many English words" (26).

The city of Regina is riddled with signs incorrectly representing the Cree word for bones, the original expression for the area. English spells the word as Wascana and, as Okimâsis tells us, pronounces it with the stress on the "penultimate or second last syllable" (26). *Nehiyawewin*, she argues, systematically places the stress on the third last syllable from the right, the antepenultimate syllable, and in longer words "every second syllable to the left of the antepenultimate is stressed" (26). Thus a Cree speaker would say "OOS-kuh-nuh" while an English speaker would pronounce it "waas-SKAA-nuh." Regina is a good example for two reasons. First, numerous signs

employ the English rendering, Wascana: Wascana Mews, Wascana Gate, Wascana Glen, Wascana Meadows, etc. (Okimâsis 27). Second, Wascana does not articulate the correct translation for *oskąna kâ-asasteki*, "where the bones are piled" (Wolvengrey 2:508).

*Nehiyawewin* differs from English in another fascinating way, its classification of nouns. Linguists call gender a "grammatical category used for the analysis of word-classes displaying such contrasts as masculine/feminine/neuter, animate/inanimate,etc." (Crystal 149). *Nêhiyawewin* does not distinguish between she and he. For example, *pimâtisiw* is a verb inflected in the third singular form of the independent mode, and means either "she or he lives." The context of the conversation provides the information required to discern whether the speaker means "he" or "she." Similarly, *Nehiyawewin* does not use masculine/feminine/neuter distinctions in classifying nouns as some European languages do. Rather, *Nehiyawewin* classifies objects as animate or inanimate, living or non-living. I offer this poem as a humourous example of the challenges second language learning poses to adults schooled in one language and trying to grasp the unique perceptions of another.

**Cree Lessons**[9]

The book says, "Language and culture are entwined—this bond cannot be broken."[10]
The teacher's voice inflects the pulse of *Nehiyawewin* as he teaches us.
He says a prayer in the first class.

Nouns, we learn, have a gender.
In French, nouns are male or female,
but in Cree, nouns are living or non-living, animate or inanimate.
A chair, *tehtapiwin*, is inanimate. *Tohtôsâpoy*, or milk, is also inanimate.
But the breast it comes from is animate.
So, too, are the female private parts…animate.
To the great disturbance of the men in our class, the *nâpew âpacihcikan* is inanimate.
They are somewhat relieved to discover the animacy of the *nâpew isihcikâsowin*.

We learn some verbs.
*nimîc'sonân*: we eat.
*nimetawânân*: we play.
*enikamoyâhk*: we are singing.
*enîmihitoyâhk*: we are dancing.
*epâhpiyâhk*: we are laughing.

We try conjugating noun with verb. We are, after all,
men and women, old enough to conjugate,
but not experienced enough
to follow the rules.

Our Cree teacher tells an inspirational story.
A *môniyâw* marries a *nehiyaw-iskwew*.
The *nâpew* commits to learning *Nehiyawewin*
but his progress is slow until *owîkimâkana* says,
"*Nehiyawe*, or you're sleeping on the couch."
Soon, very soon, the man *mistahi nihtânehiyawew*.

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[9] McIlwraith, Naomi. Native Studies 152, January 2002.
[10] Hunter, Emily and Betty Karpinski, *Introductory Cree: Part 1* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1999) 1.

Another story, another lesson.
A sick old woman lay in her lodge speaking quietly,
calling for her husband.
"Sam *nâs*,
Sam *nâs*."
"Go get Sam,
Go get Sam."
An old man, not her husband, walked by and heard her call,
"*sâminâs,*
*sâminâs*."
"Touch it softly,
touch it softly."

A dilemma: Go get Sam? Or touch it softly?
*epâhpiyâhk ekwa ekiskinohamâkosiyâhk.*
We are not yet fluent
but our bond with *Nehiyawewin*
grows tighter.

**Translation:**
*Nehiyawewin*: the Cree language
*tehtapiwin*: chair
*tohtôsâpoy*: milk
*nâpew âpacihcikan*: the man's tool
*nâpew isihcikâsowin*: the man's privates
*mîc'so*: to eat
*metawe*: to play
*nikamo*: to sing
*nîmihito*: to dance
*pâhpi*: to laugh
*môniyâw*: a White man
*nehiyaw-iskwew*: a Cree woman
*nâpew*: man
*owîkimâkana*: the man's wife
*mistahi*: a lot, very much
*nihtânehiyawew*: s/he speaks Cree very well
*nâs*: to go and get someone
*sâminâs*: to touch something very softly
*epâhpiyâhk ekwa ekiskinohamâkosiyâhk*: we are laughing and we are learning

In 1989 I canoed through Saskatchewan on my way to Thunder Bay—*kâministikwa*—from Rocky Mountain House—*asinîwâskahikan*—with five other expedition members. We paddled through a community labelled *Nipawin* on the Saskatchewan map. I must have read a sign that told me the following, for it agrees with Okimâsis's interpretation: "The name 'Nipawin' is derived from a Cree word—*nipawiwin*—meaning "a place where one stands. Native peoples gathered at the point where a well-used country trail met canoe routes" (McIlwraith 1989). Notice that the word—*Nîpawiwin*—has one more syllable than the place name indicated on the map. Furthermore, *nîpawiwin*, complete with diacritical marking to denote the first long vowel, means "standing place." The sign did not include this diacritic symbol. Okimâsis illustrates the difference in pronunciation as derived from the sign in contrast to the correct Cree in this way: Nipawin—NI-puh-win and *nîpawiwin*—nee-PUH-wi-win. *Nipâwin*—NI-paa-win—Okimâsis explains, means "sleeping place," and *nipiwin*—NI-po-win, means "death."

I find meaning in this example not only because I canoed by Nipawin, as the Saskatchewan map spells it, but also because for a number of days before finally seeing *Nîpawiwin* we could not understand the differences between what our map told us and what we saw on the river. We seemed to be canoeing on a northern lake, not the Saskatchewan River, as I called it then. In fact, at one point, when we rafted our three canoes together in the middle of the river to take a float break, we noticed that our canoes did not float downstream! Granted, there was a breeze, but the downstream force of a great river like the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* should have been mightier than the upstream effect of the wind. We were indeed perplexed. Even the

winter-like weather at the end of May could not account for the upstream effect we could feel. My journal entry for 24 May 1989 explains the mystery:

> We woke up to wind, rain, and clouds. We had breakfast in wind, rain, and clouds. We broke camp and paddled for an hour and a half in wind, rain, and clouds. We turned a corner in wind, rain, and clouds only to find that the wind, rain, and clouds got worse! We also found a lonely fisherman who told us that a new dam has been built upstream of Nipawin (there is one downstream as well), which explains this reservoir we're canoeing on. Our maps, dated 1976, don't show the new dam which was built five years ago.

I indulge in this story because just as Nipawin renders *Nîpawiwin* incorrectly, so did the Francois-Finlay Dam and reservoir, Codette Lake, re-inscribe the river, altering our encounter from a potentially ancient paddle to a twentieth-century episode. I see a parallel between language loss and human impact on the natural world. The *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* is far from a "swiftly-flowing river" in central Saskatchewan upstream of Nipawin because of the influence of several dams on the river between the Rocky Mountains and Grand Rapids.

On another cross-country trip through Saskatchewan, this time on a bicycle, I came to the Qu'Appelle Valley on a warm spring evening, just before sunset. I can easily say I saw one of the most stunning vistas of my life that night, as I slowly pedaled up the steep hill and emerged from the valley. At the time, I did not know the story I now recount. Qu'Appelle is French for "Who calls?" There is a Cree legend that explains this (*Medicine Boy and Other Tales*). Blue Cloud guided canoes for European traders during the fur trade, along many waterways between the Great Lakes, the Prairies, and the Arctic. Passing through what we now call the Qu'Appelle Valley, he fell in love with a beautiful Cree woman named Evening Bird. Over time and after many trips, Blue Cloud asked her to marry him. She agreed and he

approached her parents for permission. In the tradition of the Cree, "her mother arose and went into the teepee when she saw him coming, for it was the custom that a mother-in-law should not speak to her son-in-law, and she expected that the visitor soon would be her daughter's husband" (Brass no page number). Evening Bird's father consented and soon she and Blue Cloud would wed, though he had to guide one more trip before their union. On his way back, as he hurried to meet her he heard someone calling his name so he cried out, "*Awayna-cahtay-pwayt*?" "Who calls? Who calls?" Hearing no response, he paddled his canoe even faster only to discover that Evening Bird had passed away that very morning, "at the first gleam of dawn" (Brass). When Blue Cloud lamented to his French friends they repeated it in their own language, "Qu'Appelle? Who calls? Who calls?" (Brass). I have learned a different orthography: "*Awîna kâ-tepwet*?" The Cree name for Qu'Appelle River, however, is what I want to hear: *Tepwewisîpiy*. As well, the people who lived along the Calling River, as it is called in English, are the Calling River People, or *Tepwewisîpiwiyiniwak* (Wolvengrey 2:301).

One last sobering example reveals how a poor translation can warp our perceptions. Aboriginal women generally agree, with few exceptions, that the word "squaw" is both abusive and demoralizing. Given Amnesty International's concern over the disappearance and murder of so many Aboriginal women in Canada, the effect on our thinking of how the word "squaw" is used might explain the apathy portrayed toward the horror of these slayings:

> These acts of violence may be motivated by racism, or may be carried out in the expectation that societal indifference to the welfare and safety of Indigenous women will allow the perpetrators to escape justice. These are not new concerns. Indigenous women's organizations, government

> commissions such as the inquiry into the murder of Helen Betty Osborne and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and United Nations human rights bodies have all called on Canadian officials to address the marginalization of Indigenous women in Canadian society and to ensure that the rights and safety of Indigenous people are respected and upheld by police and courts. Sadly, fundamental measures that could help reduce the risk of violence to Indigenous women remain unimplemented. This is only one example of the way Canadian authorities have failed in their responsibility to protect the rights of Indigenous women in Canada. (http://www.amnesty.ca/stolensisters/amr2000304.pdf accessed 29 October 2006)

A brief linguistic analysis of the correct word for woman in *Nehiyawewin* honours Cree women and all other Aboriginal women, and emphasizes the possibility that corrupting such a beautiful word could perhaps have been a harbinger of the way marginalized Aboriginal women are perceived today. "*Iskwew*," the Cree word for woman, has variations in other Algonquian languages. In Alberta, orthographers do not mark the long "e" vowel because it has no counterpart. It does not sound like "ee" as in bee; rather it sounds more like the long "ā" in bake or cake. The "i" is short as in bit or sit. The first "w" serves as a glide and the final "w" functions as a semi-vowel, modifying the long "e" into a diphthong. So a closely tuned English ear might hear the whole word as "isquāyo." Fluent Cree speakers frequently contract and elide syllables and vowels so it might sound like "squāyo." My work at Fort Edmonton Park and my thinking on this word "*iskwew*" led me to write the essay, "Why is Squaw Such a Bad Word?" which first appeared in *Edmonton on Location: River City Chronicles*, edited by Dr. Heather Zwicker, 2005. I include it here to honour the word "*iskwew*," *iskwewak*—women—, *nâpewak*—men—, and *Nehiyawewin,* and as a statement of hope that attending carefully to how we use words is both a learnable skill and a moral responsibility.

## WHY IS SQUAW SUCH A BAD WORD?[11]

I work as a historical interpreter at Fort Edmonton Park. This work has taken on much deeper meaning for me than merely a "summer job," as I have ancestors who laboured for the Hudson's Bay Company and participated in the Canadian fur trade in ways the historical record largely ignores. My education on this gripping history is enriched by the increasingly challenging questions about Native-White relations in Canada posed by visitors to the Fort. I want to tell you about a number of recent challenges, including the question, "Why is squaw such a bad word?"

The Fort Edmonton of the 1840s depicts a community of approximately one hundred and twenty, all engaged in furthering the fur trade through their daily activities. One room in the Fort provokes questions from visitors about the families, women, and children living there. A sign saying "Married Men's Quarters" identifies the room. Visitors often express confusion because they want to know why all the married men lived together. I explain that the quarters to the south of the arch might more accurately be labelled the Married *Families* Quarters, though the Hudson's Bay Company failed to articulate the presence of women and families in their naming of these lodgings. Visitors frequently respond with incredulity when we clarify that the small room accommodated three families, because there is only one hearth to prepare meals and the room is only half the size of the Great Hall in Rowand House. It is difficult, frankly, imagining so many people squeezed into such a small space. Recently, a man from another part of the world, but now living in Montréal, led a group of international visitors to Fort Edmonton. The group was learning English as a

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[11] This essay first appeared in *Edmonton on Location: River City Chronicles*, edited by Heather Zwicker. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2005.

second language and their leader astutely wanted to give them an experience of local history. I conversed with this group in the Married Men's Quarters. I explained that men who had acquired neither a trade, nor the ability to read, write, or numerate were compelled to work as labourers and to live in closer quarters with their families. The leader of the group of international visitors asked if "they swapped women" in the fur trade. I was surprised by this question, raised by an intelligent man. I responded by accurately describing women's vital roles in the community and economic life of the fur trade, and by explaining that, yes, sometimes women of the fur trade just as women throughout history received negative treatment and destructive representation. I found it difficult to hide my reaction to the implications of his question and the man said apologetically that he meant it only as a joke and that he, too, understood the legacy of imperialism in his personal experience. I elaborated, with some restraint, on the intricacies of the myths and stereotypes so difficult to correct, and the group readily received an important lesson on the Canadian fur trade.

Some weeks previous, in the Married Men's Quarters again, an elderly man showed an interest in the barrel filled with the long, thin Red Osier Dogwood willow sticks. I showed him the leather double-ball and explained that it was a game similar to lacrosse, but that the players used these slightly curved sticks rather than webbed sticks. The man picked up one much thicker stick from the barrel; it was longer as well, and I explained that it was better used as a walking stick. He turned to me and said, "It's a wife-beating stick." His wife, standing by the far door, said, "I'm his wife. It's okay, he means nothing." The man's son-in-law stood at the window and offered, "Don't mind him. In this day of political correctness, gee, you can't say

anything anymore." I chose not to retaliate because of the sensitivity of both racial and gender issues and my responsibility to engage visitors professionally, despite what they may say. Instead, I responded with a question: "What do you expect me to say?"

A week later, I discussed the Made Beaver system of trade and the overplus with another visitor. These are very complex concepts, developed by the Hudson's Bay Company and their Native trading partners. Another male visitor came from around the corner and interrupted by asking, "Are we selling women today?" On yet another occasion a colleague told the story of a woman who asked, "Which tribe of Indians provided the prostitutes for the fur traders?"

Those of us who return to this seasonal work year after year do so because we enjoy history and we like people. We recognize the important role we play in public education. As an optimistic person, I hope that the ignorance represented in these two cases can give way to the gentle awareness that historical interpreters work so hard to effect.

Near the end of the summer I guided a group of people from the United States on a "Sunshine Tour." Beginning with the Native Encampment, just outside the Fort walls, I explained that Natives were integral to both the survival of the Europeans and the success of the fur trade. As we walked towards the North Saskatchewan River to view the York Boat, a kindly older gentleman asked me, "Other than referring to a woman of ill-repute, why is squaw such a bad word?" His question surprised me, and his genuine curiosity inspired me. His was an elderly group and many of them walked slowly, so several did not hear his question. I asked the man if he minded if I waited

to answer his question until after we looked at the York Boat and went inside. He agreed. My guests all enjoyed learning about the York Boat, the Fort walls, the Indian Trade Store, the Made Beaver system of trade, the Fur Press, and Rowand House.

I chose to respond to the important question raised by the curious man when we settled into the Great Hall of Rowand House. While explaining the other aspects of the Fort, I did not have much time to organize my thoughts. Fortunately, however, in my research and thinking about the complex relationships between the fur traders and their Native trading associates, and the integral contributions Native women made to the success of the fur trade, I had prepared for just such a query about Native women and was now able to provide my most educated and perceptive response. As I finished explaining that John Rowand's wife, Louise, was a Métis woman, I shared the man's question with the group and said I could give them my most thoughtful insights on the fur trade if they all had the time to commit to a discussion that would last more than a couple of minutes and the curiosity to understand the intricate nuances of relationships between women and men of the fur trade era. I told them I would express my own opinions and concerns, not those of the City of Edmonton or Fort Edmonton Park. My guests waited expectantly for my answer.

And this is what I said.

I explained, knowing that my words were not the typical material of historical interpretation at fur trade sites, that the question was simple but its answer complicated. According to American Indian theorist and activist Ward Churchill, the word "squaw" arose from the inability of European men, in New England, to say the word "*sunksquaw*" in the Narrangansett language. They corrupted it to "squaw." I

described the similarity between the Cree word for woman, "*iskwew*," and the word squaw. For Cree, like Narrangansett, is an Algonquian language. In my personal research to enhance my work as a historical interpreter, I have read a number of inspiring books on Native-White relations and women's economic roles in the fur trade, including Ward Churchill's book *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (1998), Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (1981), and Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (1980). Until very recently the chronicle of my maternal ancestors has been neglected, and my own understanding of this vital social history necessitates such scholarly investigation.

I said that everyday people do not always agree with scholars where questions like this are concerned. When I shared my reflections with my dad, who grew up speaking the Cree language, he told me that the word "squaw" is not always used in a derogatory way. He cited an example where someone came into a restaurant in Elk Point, Alberta, downstream of Edmonton on the North Saskatchewan River, and asked for a certain Native woman. The waiter, a Native man, gestured towards a woman and said, "That squaw over there." Black people object to non-Black people using the word "nigger," but may use the word themselves in an ironic and self-referential way. Perhaps they use it in a privileged way as well because of their historical experience with slavery; possibly Native people, even Native women, use the word "squaw" for similar reasons. Indeed, I know a woman who sometimes refers to herself as an "old squaw," without suggesting anything at all of a woman of ill-repute. I have learned that "*nôhtokwew*" means "Old Woman" in Cree and expresses

all the respect that such a term should. In different contexts and used by different people, words and labels take on different meanings. Squaw may be such a word.

Sometimes we act in ignorance of what a word means, ignorance meaning both "unknowing" and "demeaning." Here is an example of our sweeping ignorance of the subtleties of relationships between Native women and European men. I deepened my response to the elderly gentleman and his friends that evening by revealing how a school boy adeptly chose a moment when one of my Native colleagues had her back turned as she tended the fire at the Native Encampment to point and shout, "Look! There's a squaw!" My colleague hurt the rest of that day, and then some, and now I shared this with my respectful visitors. Where does a young boy learn this behaviour and how do we change it? People from every curve of the planet visit Fort Edmonton Park, from the very young to the very old, and I take seriously my responsibility to correct such misconceptions as expressed by this boy and to share my best understanding of the truth. I ask you now to appreciate my concern for this subject and that I have learned to temper it and articulate myself intelligently. My guests continued listening intently.

I briefly explained that when fur trading empires competed most fiercely with each other, this was good for Native people in one way and bad for Native people in two ways. It was good because competition meant better prices for the Natives. But it was bad because both liquor and women were traded. Liquor was destructive for all involved and trafficking in Native women was most especially bad for Native women.

I took some personal risks in my response, but I owed it to the man who had taken a risk in asking the question.

I expressed my frustration that I have ancestors who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company as boatbuilders, interpreters, and labourers, and I know so little about them. Their surname was Sabiston, as they were Orkneymen who worked for the company; and though my maternal grandmother's maiden name was Sabiston, definitive genealogical connections are difficult to determine as the honourable company would not have seen the merit, for at least its first century of operation, of recording the role of an indentured servant's wife in fur trade social and economic life.

Just three days previous, I elaborated, I viewed a disturbing story on the news about residents of the Shamattawa Indian Reserve in Northern Manitoba, descendants of the first Natives to trade with the Hudson's Bay Company. Sadly, the Chief of the Shamattawa Reserve appealed to the federal government because three of his people had committed suicide in nine days. I explained to my guests that to those who do not understand the difficult history, Native Indians might seem inferior. But this is not so, I said. Several factors contributed to the deterioration of relations between Natives and non-Natives, as the fur trade declined. The near extermination of the Plains Bison devastated many Plains Indian groups because the bison provided more than food for these tribes; the buffalo also contributed to shelter, clothing, footwear, culture, and spirituality. The fur trade declined as the land was taken up by settlers and homesteaders, and as governments forced Natives onto reserves and to sign treaties. Some residential schools, not all, I emphasized, did substantial harm to Native people

by abusing the students in many ways, and that abuse cycle sadly continues in some of these Native families and communities. Now, as I think back on my talk with these elderly visitors, I would add that residential schools, whether or not the students suffered abuse in any way, were based on a racist, patriarchal assumption that our Native Indians needed "civilizing" to a European standard.

I trust that my guests saw me express my concern most passionately when I talked of the more than sixty women who have gone missing in Vancouver in the last fifteen or twenty years. Many of these women were Native, worked in the sex-trade, and were addicted to drugs. Only in the last two or three years have the families of these women successfully summoned the authorities to re-examine these missing persons' cases. They believe the authorities ignored their female relatives because these women led dangerous lives, but to know that is not enough. These families declare, "My sister is a human being;" "My daughter is a human being;" "My wife is a human being;" "My mother is a human being." Now, the families reach towards closure in their ordeals, hoping that the remains of their female relations will be found and their murders solved. At the time, I could not predict that here, too, in what the Cree call *Amiskwacîwâskahikan*, at least eight *more* Native or Métis women would go missing and that their bodies would be found in the vicinity of Edmonton, in wooded or industrial areas where danger often lurks. Just yesterday, as I waited for my bus on Stony Plain Road in our city's west end, at 7:30 a.m. on my way to the university, I watched a Native woman walk by me with a bruise on her face. I wondered how this woman came to have that bruise on her face, whether she was part of the sex trade along this busy avenue. I wondered whether that bruise was the visual remainder of

her historical circumstances, the travesty of colonialism that left her with few options other than to seek whatever value her flesh provides. I did not say these things to my visitors because it may have been too much misery to share and because they had not yet happened. But I did speak of what I knew at the time.

I knew how heavy my words were, as I concluded my passionate plea for understanding to my elderly guests. I said that these are profoundly complex issues and that there are good and bad in all cultures. I warned that not all Native people suffer; many Native people in Canada thrive and lead, are strong and accomplish much. But too many continue suffering and we must ask why and what can we do about it.

I finished by taking a deep breath and saying, "That is the best I can do for now. I thank you, sir, for asking this important question and I thank you all for listening. I hope I haven't belaboured the issue, but there you have it."

The sincere man who asked the important question responded, "No, your answer is outstanding. Thank you so much. We really appreciate the heart you have put into your time with us." My eighteen guests clapped quietly and I smiled as well as I could under the burden of my words.

Just now, as I reflect on *Amiskwacîwâskahikan*, the city of my birth, I think about its recent 100th birthday in October of 2004. Birthday parties are a lot of fun, and I remember many cakes spread with blue icing and prisms of candied sprinkles, in the communities of Norwood, Parkdale, McQueen, and West Jasper Place where I ran through the neighbourhoods with my young friends, until the sun went down and I could no longer ignore my mother's calls to come home, "Now!" As an adult, I have

lived and worked many years away from Edmonton, but now as I commit to making it my home, I realize both my rootedness in this city *and* my sadness that I walk home along Jasper Avenue and Stony Plain Road rather than through MacKinnon Ravine, an intriguing wooded gully leading into the swiftly flowing waters of the river I love. Some years ago, while retracing a historic fur trade route with five friends, I canoed this same *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* from nearly its headwaters in the Rockies to its mouth at Grand Rapids on Lake Winnipeg, on my way to *Kaministiquia*, also known as Thunder Bay or Old Fort William, on Lake Superior. The North Saskatchewan River is an artery along a vital waterway that linked such important fur trade centres as Fort Edmonton and Fort William. Indeed, this same river connected Fort Edmonton to York Factory on Hudson Bay, where the Home Guard Cree, the forbears of the Shamattawa Cree in Northern Manitoba, helped Company employees stave off scurvy, producing pemmican from caribou, hunting geese, and fishing when starvation threatened.

The reconstructed Fort Edmonton now sits on the south shore of the North Saskatchewan River, south and west of MacKinnon Ravine, even though Rossdale, the Ross Flats, and the current lawn bowling greens of the provincial legislature were three of the previous five sites of Fort Edmonton along the north shore. Notwithstanding the impact of West Edmonton Mall on our cultural history, many people still experience a thrill at visiting Fort Edmonton Park and the sensory awakening such an outing allows. The park signifies much of the historical development of our city, from its beginnings as a meeting place between Natives and Europeans, through its growth into a town and eventually a city. I hope by sharing my

concerns with you I have honoured the memory and presence of *nehiyaw'skwewak* (Cree women) and women of other groups, whose histories continue to pulse through our city in much the same way as our river.'

Speaking is a skill, and speaking respectfully a responsibility. When I think of the many skills I and many I know have not learned, I wonder about all of the women's wisdom we could lose if *Nehiyawewin* and other Indigenous languages disappear. I have found many books and articles where much of this maternal cultural knowledge is contained, and I can hear the argument: "Don't worry. You can find what you need to know in a book." But there is nothing like the taste of pemmican at a Ghost Dance, the sound of a voice smooth as Saskatoon syrup coming from the man playing the hand drum as we dance the Ghost Dance, the smells of a hide I process with my friends, including not only the earthy, smoky aroma when *ekîsihâhpinihkeyâhk*—as we finish tanning the hide—but the pungent nose-hair-curling odours of the fleshing stage, the sight of pelicans on the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* upstream of *Sâskwatôn*, or the feel of certain Cree words flowing off my tongue when I have practiced them enough to know I sound fluent.

## *Tân'si Kesinakacihtâyan Âhpinihkewin* – How to Tan a Hide[12]

Watch how your grandmother does it. Listen
because the scraper sounds
differently from the flesher.
Remember that sound.
*kiskisitota ôma ehitihtâkwak.*

Get four strong saplings for the frame.
Watch the way your grandmother ties
them together with rawhide laces. Pull
the cords tight if her hands
are aflame with arthritis. It's important
to work the flesh side first. Remove
fat, muscle. With the *mîhkîhkwan.*
Don't let the smell
bother you. Remember
to work the flesh side first.
*kiskisi iyâyaw kamihkitaman.*

Help your grandmother prepare
the meat for drying. This will take
about four days with a smudge
under the hot sun. Remember the feel
of the meat when it curls around. Brittle
enough to break. Taste it
to be sure. Remember.
*kiskisi* because one day you, too,
will be a grandmother.

Turn the frame over so the fur side
is up. Now watch how your grandmother
scrapes the fur off. Uses the scraper.
*wâpam tân'si ehisihâpacihtât ôma mâtahikan.*

Listen
for how the *mâtahikan* sounds
differently from the *mîhkîhkwan.*
*Nitohta.*
*Nâkatohke ekwa kikapehten*
*tân'si mâtahikan môya*
*ehitihtâkwak peyakwan mîhkîhkwan.*
Your grandmother will show you just how
to scrape the hide so it's the same

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[12] I thank Alice Harkness, Olive Modersohn, and Dr. Anne Anderson for teaching me how to tan a hide, and Jenny Baril for learning with me.

thickness all over. Watch the way *kôhkom*
taps it. Listens for the sound. Checks
for even thickness. You listen too.
Remember that sound.
*pehta kîsta mîna.*
*kiskisitota ôma ehitihtâkwak.*

Once all the fur is removed you're ready
to oil the hide. Brains of the animal
work just fine. Boil them in a small
amount of water, about a bucket full. Watch
as your grandmother works the brains
into the hide over and over again,
until the hide begins to soften. Until
the brains saturate the hide. Remember,
the brains soften the hide. *kiskisitota,*
*ôhi wiyîtihpa ehâpacihtâk kayôskinamihk wayân.*

Once softened, the hide is ready
for tanning. Listen to your grandmother.
She'll tell you what kind
of wood to collect. Look for a fallen tree
that has progressed nearly to soil.
The underside might be earth but the wood
inside is perfect: that pulpy,
spongy wood that won't flame
but makes good smoke. Watch closely
as your grandmother hangs that hide
over the smudge. Stay with your grandmother.
Help her with that hide.
Feed the smoke.
*kakisâtat kôhkom.*
*ewîcihat kamâtahwât.*
*pônamâso.*

Listen very carefully.
Remember, the brains soften the hide.
Remember,
so you will know.

*nâkatohke.*
*kiskisitota ôhi wiyîtihpa ehâpacihtâk kayôsinamihk wayân.*
*kiskisi,*
*ekosi kikanakacihtân.*

*nohtâwiy opîkiskwewin*
**Chapter Two: Father Tongue**

**You Who Dance so Brightly**

You died, Dad, and the skies darkened
as an eclipse extinguishes
the day, pushes the sun
into the ground.
*Wanitipiskipayin kotâwîwi-pîsimw.*
But soon enough I hear
you echo. *Kicîstâwân wîpac,*
and you shine clear as the Leaf-Falling Moon.
*Ekîhkâyâsôweyan*
*tâpiskôc awa*
*pinâskomi-pîsimw*
*ekîsikâyâstek.*

I tell everyone your story,
how you spoke Cree so well,
so brilliantly I say,
*ekîpakaskît nohtâwiy,*
in *Nehiyawewin.*
As if you are a colour
shimmering keenly
as those ghosts who dance, ablaze
in the northern sky. *Kitaspâsôwân*
*mwehci aniki*
*cîpayak kânîmihitocik.*

Red like the sky as the sun retires,
*tâpiskôc mihkwaskâw ispîhk*
*kâpahkisimok.* Yellow, when
the sun emerges from slumber,
a far off fire,[13] *osâwinâkwan*
*ispîhk esâkâstenâk.*
Green, deepened as a forest
by winter's interlude,
*askihtakoskâw sakâw*
*wâwîs piponohk.*
Lucid as the hues in heaven
when *Kisemanitow* opens
the gates for you,
*pakaskikihcikâsikohk*

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[13] Wolvengrey, Arok, *nêhiyawêwin: itwêwina Cree: Words Volume 2* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2001) 615)

*ispîhk eyôhtepitamâsk*
*kihcikîsikowiyôhtenawewina*
*Kisemanitow.*
I am told not to look *osâm*
*nicîpayâmatison ispîhk*
*kiya ecîpayikawiyan*
*kâpakaskinîmihitoyan*
*mâka kipehtâtin*
*ecîstâweyan ekwa*
*epakaskiyan.*

**Translation:**
*Kiya kâpakaskinîmihitoyan*; You who are dancing so brightly
*Wanitipiskipayin Kotâwîwi-pîsimw*: to darken as in an eclipse
*Kicîstâwân wîpâc*: you make an echo soon
*Ekîhkâyâsôweyan tâpiskôc awa pinâskomi-pîsimw ekîsikâyâstek*: You shine brightly just like the Leaf-Falling Moon
*Nehiyawewin*: the Plains Cree language
*ekîpakaskît nohtâwiy*: My father spoke Cree very fluently (brightly)
*Kitaspâsôwân mwehci aniki cîpayak kânîmihitocik*:You shine brightly just like those ones, those ghosts who are dancing (the Northern Lights)
*tâpiskôc mihkwaskâw ispîhk kâpahkisimok*: like the red sky at sunset
*osâwinâkwan ispîhk esâkâstenâk:* It is yellow when the sun retires
*asihtakoskâw sakâw wâwîs piponohk*: The forest is green especially in winter
*Kisemanitow*: the Great Spirit
*pakaskikihcikîsikohk ispîhk eyôhtepitamâsk kihcikîsikowiyôhtenawewina Kisemanitow:*
Heaven is brilliant when the Great Spirit opens the gates for you
*osâm nicîpayâmatison ispîhk kiya ecîpayikawiyan kâpakaskinîmihitoyan mâka kipehtâtin ecîstâweyan ekwa epakaskîyan*: because I am visited by ghosts when you are a ghost who is dancing so brightly, but I can hear you, you are echoing and you are fluent.

Harold Cardinal's manifesto, *The Unjust Society*, sits here beside me on my desk; I have lit a candle for both Dad and Mr. Cardinal, for they shared a hospital room in their final weeks. A pen bookmarks *The Unjust Society* between pages 78 and 79. Possibly this is the last book Mr. Cardinal signed, for he passed away less than two weeks after signing it for me: Dr. Harold Cardinal. Dr. Cardinal says this of white idealists:

> On a more grandiose scale, some white idealists really believe they can reach an understanding of the people and assist specific Indian communities on the basis of summer field projects, perhaps spread over two or even three years. They have struck out before they take the field. Cultural differences are magnified by their approach. It will take many years of practical experience before the white man can comprehend fully the deep differences in the values of the Indians and those of middle-class Canadians. (78-79)

My father was a white man, but far from endorsing some fanciful ideal about how to save the Indian, Dad had what Dr. Cardinal argues is necessary for white men to understand the cultural crevasse they must traverse to communicate with Indians: years of practical experience. This cultural involvement included not only a childhood of assimilation to Plains Cree culture at Fishing Lake and Frog Lake in East Central Alberta. As a young man in his early twenties Dad worked as an orderly at the Aberhart Sanitarium with patients afflicted with tuberculosis. Many of these patients spoke Cree and Dad's facility not only in the language but in the culture of the Cree, *Nehiyawewin ekwa Nehiyawisîhcikewin*, would have surprised some of these Cree patients and made an alien environment somewhat more hospitable.

About twenty years after Dad worked at the Aberhart Sanitarium, he and Mom became foster parents. Mom had worked as a registered nurse all of her adult life and had acquired many technical skills to combine with her innate and deep

capacity for compassion in her many years of experience as a neonatal nurse. The first infant my parents fostered required open heart surgery to repair a hole in her septum. She needed to gain weight first, but the institutional environment of a hospital precluded this imperative, so my parents talked it over and agreed to provide this baby girl with the home environment she needed. Within a few months she gained the necessary weight and survived the surgery. Soon she returned to her own mother. Mom and Dad foster-parented many children over the next twenty years including one who remains a vital and loved member of our family.

Foster parenting is a controversial endeavour, especially because so many children in care are Aboriginal and, for a time, so many foster parents were white. While these demographics are changing, it is a fact that in a courtroom a grandmother called Dad a "*Môniyâw!*" for stealing Indian children. When inflected with enough frustration and anger the word "*môniyâw*" changes from a benign descriptor meaning "white man" to a term of derision meaning "despised white man." I do not know how personally Dad took such mockery, for he may have heard and experienced worse as the only white child in the Cree country of Eastern Alberta, and in his work buying and selling used furniture in the last twenty years of his life. Many of the people Dad worked with in his garage-sale business were Cree-speaking *Nehiyawak, aniki Nehiyawak kânehiyawecik*. On occasion, Dad heard and understood someone speak badly of white people: *nohtâwiy kîpehtawew ekwa ekînisitohtawât ana awiyak kâkîmâyâcimât môniyawâk mîskaw*. But then he would speak in Cree, letting that person know he understood: *mâka kînaskwahamawew ekîpakaskinehiyawet ekwa ekîwâpahtihât ekînisitohtawât.* Surely this would have surprised a frustrated *Nehiyaw*.

I tell these stories *nitâcimaw nohtâwiy osâm kîspin kâkîkiskeyimimât* Dr. Cardinal *nohtâwiya, ekwa kîspin kâkîmaskawâtisicik etokwe kahkîhotôtemitocik,* because if Dr. Cardinal had known these things about Dad, and if they had been well, perhaps he and Dad could have become good friends.

That my father willingly worked in the inner city of Edmonton with many *Nehiyawak ekwa mihcet kotakak iyiniwak*, Cree people and many other Native people, helping them move themselves and their belongings in his old blue Dodge van or later his old orange Chevy truck, in a process researchers call "churn" to describe the continued mobility of marginalized Aboriginals both to and from cities and within city boundaries (Norris and Jantzen 111), confirms his cultural acumen with Aboriginal people.

## *Tawâw*—There is Room, Always Room for One More

Mom tells the story of how
you didn't barge in, how
you waited until the other guy
didn't even know what he had lost,
how you told him
you were an opportunist
moving in where others leave room.

You saw the space,
saw lots of room for living.
*kikîwâpahten emisitawâk*
*ekwa ita kâwîkihk.*

You asked her and she said, "Yes."
There you were, the two of you,
your life to fashion together.
Lots of room, but no directions,
so off you went stepping gently,
leaving just enough of a trace
and just enough room
for others to follow.

*ekîtawatahamek.*

Along we all came, your children,
grandchildren, foster children,
cats, kittens, too many to count,
even a bird or two once or twice:
you and Mom cleared a space
for all of us.

*kîya ekwa nikâwînân ekîtawinamawiyâhk.*

There was so much space around me
I couldn't see it
until, your circle complete,
you made more space.
*ekîtawinikeyan nawac mistahi.*

There was room in your mind
for this Cree language
*ôma Nehiyawewin,*
for this Cree culture
*ekwa ôma Nehiyawisîhcikewin,*

but I didn't hear.
Too busy, I wasn't listening.
*ekîhotamihoyân ekwa môya*
*ekîpehtamân osâm*
*môya ekînitohtâtân.*

Now, I wish I could have seen
and heard more,
*anohc epakoseyimoyân kahkîwâpahten*
*kahkîpehten ayiwâk,*
wish I could have been more open
to your special way of living,
*epakoseyimoyân kahkîtawinikeyân*
*ekînanahihtâtân.*

What do you think of me, Dad,
writing this in Cree?
Could there have been more room
for a Cree conversation,
for a Cree understanding,
for a daughter's understanding
her father's honour
in the space between, *tawâyihk,*
your childhood and your passing.
Is it enough that I've
cleared a space on my desk
to light this candle for you?

Would that I could
have made more room.
*nipakoseyimon kahkîtawinamâtân.*

One could perceive the circumstances that brought Dad and Dr. Cardinal to the same hospital room as synchronicity, but I believe something wider and deeper orchestrated this juncture. They both arrived at the Emergency Department of the Misericordia Hospital in west Edmonton on 19 May 2005. The next day they were both admitted and transferred to the same room on 6 West. Our families had not yet become acquainted. On the afternoon of the 20th Mom and I sat together while Dad slept, and the nurses wheeled in a man wearing a large, emerald green bandanna on his head. In spite of the curtains separating patients, the hospital environment can be an intimate space. There were four beds in the room, separated by a large space in the middle of the room. Mom and I sat along the window, near the foot of Dad's bed. The nurse had drawn the curtain around the bed of the man they had just wheeled in, and Mom overheard the nurse address the man as Mr. Cardinal. Mom whispered to me that he must be a Native man because they called him Mr. Cardinal. When I heard the other nurse call him Harold, I whispered excitedly back to Mom: "Mom, guess who that is? He's Harold Cardinal, author of *The Unjust Society*, the book I use when I teach Native Studies 100." I had seen a couple of Native women waiting in the hall so I went out speak to them. I introduced myself and asked if they were with Mr. Cardinal. They said yes, he was their brother. I told them about Dad, that he could speak Cree and about Mom, and that I used *The Unjust Society* when I taught Native Studies 100. They smiled and I knew we would become friends. Over the next two or three weeks the Cardinal and McIlwraith families shared much, though each focussed on its own loved one, by greeting each other at the elevator, in the hallway, or by conversing quietly in the waiting room.

Dr. Cardinal was a very well-known man and he had visitors from nine in the morning until nine in the evening. Family were always there, and often family, friends, or political allies from other parts of Canada. Dad, on the other hand, was a quiet, unassuming man. Mom stayed with him day and night from the 19th of May until his passing on the 28th of August 2005. Unfortunately, my siblings and I could not quit work, so we went to see Dad each day after work, staying until visiting hours closed and often later. I now observe these differences because I believe in the creative possibilities of diversity. As well, that two such different men garnered such similar expressions of familial love moved me to the degree that this time is forever imprinted in my memory.

Dr. Cardinal made history when he wrote *The Unjust Society* in 1969, for he greatly contributed to the undoing of Jean Chrétien's *White Paper* and his proposal to revoke the *Consolidated Indian Act*:

> The history of Canada's Indians is a shameful chronicle of the white man's disinterest, his deliberate trampling of Indian rights and his repeated betrayal of our trust. Generations of Indians have grown up behind a buckskin curtain of indifference, ignorance and, all too often, plain bigotry. Now, at a time when our fellow Canadians consider the promise of the Just Society, once more the Indians of Canada are betrayed by a programme which offers nothing better than cultural genocide.
>
> The new Indian policy promulgated by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's government, under the auspices of the Honourable Jean Chrétien, minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and Deputy Minister John A. MacDonald, and presented in June 1969 is a thinly disguised programme of assimilation through extermination. (1)

Harold Cardinal expressed the understandable resentment of Canadian Indians when he wrote these words in 1969. At twenty-four, he had already exhibited considerable eloquence and leadership. At thirty-three my father conveyed a different, though no less profound, influence on our family and his sphere of relationships. Speaking to

Cree patients at the Aberhart Sanitarium, Dad showed exactly the opposite of the disinterest Dr. Cardinal wrote of, for I believe there is no more adroit way of showing interest in a people and their culture than to speak *with* them in *their* language. *nitâpôkeyihcikân nohtâwiy ekînihtânisitohtawât Nehiyawak osâm ekînihtâwîcinehiyawemât*: I believe Dad understood Cree people so well because he spoke excellent Cree, with them.

Dr. Cardinal must have sensed Dad's facility with Cree culture, though there was no time to reveal this to Dr. Cardinal in the intensity of palliative illness, beyond telling his sisters Dad spoke Cree. One day, one of Dr. Cardinal's visitors, a woman with long, white hair, came over to our side of the curtain, cotton this time, not buckskin, and said, "I understand there's someone here who can speak Cree." Dad was sleeping at the time, and Mom gestured to him, saying, "Yes, my husband grew up at Frog Lake. But he has ALS and can no longer speak at all." The tragedy of losing one's speech, particularly one who is bilingual, is an ineffable story of grief.

But let me try.

**Perfect Not Perfect**

**Past Perfect**
If I had understood
a bit of Cree,
a bit of how Cree
had shaped you, I might not
have misunderstood you.

*ahpô etikwe kahkîsôhkikoteyihtamân kanitohtâtân.*

**Present Perfect**
I have tried
to make peace with my tribe
as a wise woman
once advised.

*nîyanân ewîtisânîhitoyâhk*
*kîyawâw kâwâhkômiyek.*

**Future Perfect**
When I finish this task I will
have learned not to frown, but to lean
into the perfect pitch of your speech:
your voice, Tamarack tympanum.

*kakiskinohamâkosiyân kîkway kisteyihtâkwan:*
*tapahteyimiso kâya pîweyim kicayisiyiniw.*[14]

[14] There are 15 traditional Cree teaching verbs. *tapahteyimiso kâya pîweyim kicayisiyiniw*, translated to English, means, "Be humble. Do not judge mankind harshly." Hunter, Emily and Betty Karpinski. 1999. *Introductory Cree: Part II*. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 134.

A day or two later Dad experienced the first of six close encounters with death he would be privy to in the coming weeks. My family and I all gathered at Dad's bed in the middle of that first afternoon, staying with him for several hours until he returned to us. Just a few days later hospital staff moved Dr. Cardinal next door, to a private room. We saw the family take their father to the chapel on the main floor a number of times, and we were pleased that hospital chaplains allowed the Cardinal family to smudge and practice their own spirituality.

I remember those days vividly as if Dad and Dr. Cardinal communicated through osmosis. The telling paradox of this whole experience is that both men were bilingual, they shared each other's languages, and yet they could not converse with each other, not even in the dominant tongue. We could not even speak to our father in the last six months of his life because amytrophic lateral sclerosis stole his speech. We did, however, have two aids: a letter board and a word board. We would point to a letter or word, continue until Dad nodded, and we would piece together what we could. This is what is so remarkable about what happened about three weeks after Dr. Cardinal passed away.

One evening in late June Dad tried to "say" something to Mom and my sister. They managed to derive "Card" from the letter board but then Dad became so exhausted he could not continue. Charlene and Mom could not decipher what he had tried to say. About a half an hour later Dad tried again. This time he spelled "Indi" and Charlene exclaimed, "Oh, you want to know about Dr. Cardinal?!" Dad's eyes lit up, his nodding ability almost depleted by now. Mom gently informed Dad that Dr. Cardinal had passed away a few weeks earlier. Then, through an amazing feat of

tenacity and superhuman belief in the importance of his task, Dad somehow "told" Charlene and Mom that he had heard and understood Dr. Cardinal and a family member praying for him in Cree, the night Dad, himself, had almost died.

Dad was a soft-spoken, soft-living man and it seems so harsh that neither could he speak nor could we hear his voice in those final months. *Môya kîsîpwewemow nohtâwiy ekwa mistahi ekîkâmwâtisit.* I remember hearing Dr. Cardinal's voice from behind the green, cotton curtain, for he would speak and speak and speak, which was amazing for someone so very ill. I could not hear the words but I could hear the pitch of his voice flowing and curving as a river might. The memory actually reminds me of my father's voice, how like fluid it was. I truly wish I could have heard him speak more Cree, and more English too, for *ninohtenehiyawiwîcipîkiskwemâw nohtâwiy ekwa ewîpeyâhtakoweyân.* I want to speak Cree with my father and I am going to speak carefully.

## *Aniki Nîso Nâpewak, Kâpîkiskwecik*: Two Men Talking

When I think of how
you might have sounded
had you talked, I imagine
the persistent thrum of peace.
*nipehten etakahkihtâkwahk*
*peyâhtakeyimowin.*

If I listen carefully
I hear buds opening
in May, as you parley
in harmony.
*epehtamân etakahkihtâkwahk*
*peyâhtakeyimowin.*

If I lean into the rhythms
of *Nehiyawewin*
as you converse on a summer
morning the aspens clap
their shy applause.
*epehtamân etakahkihtâkwahk*
*peyâhtakeyimowin.*

When I consider your debate
I hear water trickling
over pebbles set expressly
for the timbre of soft talk.
*epehtamân etakahkihtâkwahk*
*peyâhtakeyimowin.*

As I catch the cadence
of Plains Cree speech
*Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*
flows swiftly but peacefully.
*ecîwek ekwa epehtamân*
*etakahkihtâkwahk*
*peyâhtakeyimowin.*

When I think I recognize
your thoughts on this fall day
I hear a pause:
you both wait patiently
for understanding, you hold
your words carefully, offering
them only when you're sure
they're a gift.

*kîyawâw kikitotitonâwâw*
*ekwa emanâcihtoyek*
*ekwa enisitohtâtoyek*
*aniki nîso nâpewak*
*kâpîkiskwecik.*

Two snowflakes, suspended on air,
tarrying, not wanting
the conversation to end.

*nîso pîwâkoniswak*
*enôhtenehiyawiwîcipîkiskwemitoyek*
*môya kinitaweyihtenâwâw*
*kakipihtoweyek.*

Until I began studying *Nehiyawewin*, the difference between an analytical language and a polysynthetic tongue had not occupied any space in my grey matter. I had taken a number of French courses throughout my education but analysis and polysynthesis were beyond the purview of efforts because French, like English, relies heavily on syntax to organize communication. As well, while English belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family and exhibits considerable sway by such languages as Latin, Greek, German, Norwegian, Spanish, etc., and French is of the Romance languages, French continues to affect English as evidenced by such nouns as beef (*boeuf*), egg (*oeuf*), voyageur, portage, Métis, money, nation, and these verbs: voyage, rendezvous, parlay, parley, parole, disburse, and embroil.

I have chosen a number of French terms that materialize from Canada's fur trade history. The Eurocolonial history of Canada proceeded mainly on an East-West axis because of the general East-West orientation of our rivers, the transportation route to and from Hudson Bay for the English and the Hudson's Bay Company, and to and from the St. Lawrence River for the French and later the Hudson's Bay Company's fiercest rival the Northwest Company (Innis 167-168). Having canoed a significant portion of this territory between the Rocky Mountains and Lake Superior, I now appreciate the depth of Aboriginal leadership on Canada's fur trade economy and history. More recently, I have gained a linguistic perspective on Aboriginal and Eurocolonial Canadian history with my study of *Nehiyawewin*. Discovering *Nehiyawewin* has been much like setting off down a river whose waterfalls I have not yet heard. At first I learned the sounds of the Plains Cree "Y" dialect, simple nouns for animals, food, dishes, and basic greetings. My classmates and I were greatly

amused, and challenged, to see that the word for fork—*cîscayisîpwâkanis*—has seventeen letters and the word for bus—*kiskinohamâtôtâpânâskw*—twenty-two letters. How so very different from English and how intriguing to learn that one word can contain not one but many concepts! This demonstrates a process linguists identify as noun incorporation, "where a generic noun (e.g. 'vehicle') is syntactically included within a verb, thereby cross-classifying a specific noun (e.g. 'car') that is governed by the verb (Crystal 238). For example, *Kiskinohamâto* is a Cree verb meaning to teach each other, while the noun *otâpânâskw* expresses the concept of a vehicle. Hence *kiskinohamâtôtâpânâskw* is a vehicle that takes children to school, where they learn together, an example of incorporation where a verb and a noun unite to enlarge upon meaning. The verb *cîstah* means to pierce something or someone with a pointed object. *Wiyâkanis* is a noun meaning a small bowl or dish. The Cree word for fork, then delicately combines a verb with a noun to connote a pointed implement used to pierce food and eat. Inflections such as—*is*—add more meaning to the word, expressing the diminutive form.

Syntactical relationships between words are considerably more rigid in English than in Cree, when shaping sentences. This is not to say, however, that Cree is a simpler form of human communication. Very much to the contrary, the phenomenon of polysynthesis in Cree is a complex process of combining "several or all syntactic elements of a sentence in one word" (Pearsall and Trumble 1123). Crystal describes polysynthesis this way:

> 'polysynthetic' or 'incorporating' languages demonstrate morphologically complex, long word-forms, as in the constructions typical of many American Indian languages, and encountered occasionally in English, in coinages such as *anti/dis/establish/ment/arian/ism/s.* (267)

Intimidated by the intricate morphology and length of Cree words, newcomers to the language might gain some insight from Castel's and Westfall's observation:

> Upon studying Cree for the first time, many speakers of English are dismayed at the length of many Cree words and at the complexity of Cree grammar. To put things in perspective, one has only to look at Old English with its four cases (and remnant of a fifth) and complex inflectional system. (xvi)

They add that once a student understands all the individual components of a polysyllabic word and the rules for structuring and ordering those parts, the word becomes easier to manage.

Working through these frustrations has afforded me one of the most meaningful experiences of my education. That English has changed and now displays more analytic tendencies demanding a strident ordering of words in a sentence (Crystal 18), and *Nehiyawewin* functions synthetically to organize syntactical elements *within* words explains why translating speech, word for word, from one language to the other and back is most often not possible. While we can translate many nouns with relative ease such as apple—*picikwâs*—or book—*masinahikan*—, *cîscayisîpwâkanis* and *kiskinohamâtôtâpânâskw*, nouns comprised by compounding a noun with a verb, illustrate that such words themselves, not just the ideas of the words, physically express a number of concepts. The nouns fork and bus in English do contain these notions but in an abstract way, and when speaking to organize these ideas into a coherent flow of communication English sounds as though it must follow a more demanding regime than Cree. Contrary to what some might believe Cree does have its own exacting conditions. This means that direct translation of spoken Cree to English and back is an apparently futile endeavour. Free translation does offer hope,

however, by allowing an interpreter to embrace the meaning of an expression and share that understanding in a respectful, scrupulous manner.

Such cross-cultural work is rigourous because *Nehiyawewin* has another characteristic that confuses English speakers attempting to learn Cree:

> The verb is by far the most important part of speech in the Cree language. It not only expresses actions as in the case of the English verb,... but also conveys thought as to the subject and also to the object of the verb,... and in addition reference may be included as to the degree or extent to which the action was performed.
>
> Many distinctions are made by the many changes to which the verb may be subjected. All these forms are quite regular, and once the principle is understood, a verb may be taken, and, by adding prefixes, giving adverbial syllables and the desired ending for number, gender, tense, mood, and voice, express with the one word what might need in English, a whole sentence. (Hives 7)

For example, if I were to translate the following English sentence into Cree this is what it might look like:

No, I don't want to take the bus; I'd rather go by canoe.

*Môya, môya ninohtehotâpâson osâm ehayiwâkeyihtamân kapapâmicimeyân.*

The English sentence contains thirteen words, whereas the Cree formulation contains six. Cree words tend, in fact, to be much longer than the English because they function polysynthetically and need to coordinate a number of concepts within one word. Here is what each concept looks like when distinguished from its neighbours: *ni-nohte-h-otâpâson osâm e-h-ayiwâkeyiht-a-mân ka-papâmicime-yân.* The three verbs in the Cree sentence are *otâpâso*—to ride the bus, *ayiwâkeyiht*—to prefer, and *papâmicime*—to canoe.

The inflections in a Cree word follow a purposeful pattern, meaning that *Nehiyawewin* has important rules for human communication. It is, in fact, the most

widely spoken Indigenous language in Canada, with five dialects spoken in different areas ranging from Québec to Alberta. Pockets of Cree-speaking peoples also reside in the Northwest Territories, northern British Columbia, Montana, and North Dakota (Wolfart 1973:9). Plains Cree, the "Y" dialect, is spoken in southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and throughout most of northern Alberta. Speakers of one dialect may understand those speaking another dialect, as regional sound variations may be minimal. The word for "you" demonstrates these slight differences:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Swampy Cree | "n" dialect | *kîna* |
| Woods Cree | "th" dialect | *kîtha* |
| Attikamek Cree | "r" dialect | *kîra* |
| Moose Cree | "l" dialect | *kîla* |
| Plains Cree | "y" dialect | *kîya* (Wolfart and Carroll 6). |

Where "y" is spoken in the Plains Cree dialect, the other dialects substitute their respective consonants, fricatives, or semi-vowels. Castel and Westfall, however, caution against relying strictly on this simplification because of important variations in sounds, diction, and grammar across the dialects (xvi). Certainly, the diverse environments that Cree-speaking people—*aniki Nehiyawak, kânehiyawecik*—inhabit will influence each dialect to some degree. For example, the Swampy Cree speakers around Hudson Bay use extra descriptors, and verbs, for coastal conditions that dictate their fishing efforts, just as the Plains Cree who historically followed the buffalo herds use a variety of terms for their buffalo work.

In recent years several Plains Cree speakers have compiled a number of Plains Cree dictionaries, demonstrating both the resilience and currency of the language: Beaudet, 1985; Cardinal, LeClaire, Waugh et al., 1998, Wolfart and Ahenakew, 1998; and Wolvengrey et al., 2001. Castel and Westfall compiled a Woods Cree dictionary

in 2001, a valuable resource even to Plains Cree "y" dialect speakers. These dictionaries signify the character and complexity of *Nehiyawewin* as both a spoken and written language. The Cree speakers involved in the critical work on these concordances chose their own strategies for how to record the entries in their respective works. For example, at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Wolfart and Ahenakew provide the stem forms for their noun and verb entries, indicated by a long hyphen. Wolvengrey et al., working at the First Nations University in Regina, Saskatchewan, have two volumes of their Cree dictionary. Volume 1, the Cree-English version gives the Cree entries in inflected form which means these words can stand alone as legitimate Cree words. This is particularly useful for Cree students who actually speak Cree, because they "prefer inflected forms which match actual words over the more abstract stem forms" (Wolvengrey 1:xxxi). Volume 1 also provides syllabics for each entry. Volume 2, the English-Cree text, provides Cree entries without inflections so that these stem forms permit those students who do not speak Cree to predict "various word forms,…which may not always match any actual Cree word" (Wolvengrey 1:xxxi). As in Wolfart's and Ahenakew's work, Wolvengrey's Volume 2 is useful from both a linguistic and a non-fluent perspective. The Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary, a twenty-five year collaborative effort at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, provides Cree entries in their 3rd person singular inflected form and glosses alternative words and spellings to reveal variant, Northern, archaic, or modern terms (Waugh et al.: XIX-XXII).

The efforts of these Cree speakers and scholars have augmented Cree language studies at an important time in Aboriginal language revitalization. Indeed,

with the recent change of government in Canada, the new leadership under Prime Minister Stephen Harper shows a decreased concern for Aboriginal language preservation by withdrawing most of the financial commitments made by the Liberals under Paul Martin. On 2 November 2006, the Conservatives announced that the outstanding $160 million allocated for Aboriginal languages will be reduced to $50 million (Doucet 13). This decision enunciates an ignorance of the historical and contemporary significance of Aboriginal peoples and their languages in Canada. The federal government, in its refusal to uphold commitments and crucial resources to preserving these languages in the same way it reveres the two national languages, seems not to comprehend the vitality of these cultures and their productive forms of communication. Consider, however, Wolfart's and Ahenakew's explanation of the dynamism of *Nehiyawewin* in the introduction to *The Student's Dictionary of Literary Plains Cree*:

> Predictably, a dictionary based on spontaneously produced texts is much less even in coverage than the finely polished dictionaries of the national languages…
>
> The choice of entries, in other words, reflects the topics and verbal resources of the texts that have been excerpted rather than the lexicographical principles adopted by the authors…
>
> Amongst the asymmetries typical of the lexicon, derivational sets that remain incomplete are most readily apparent. In practice, students learning to speak Cree can normally call on a fluent speaker to fill in specific lacunae—in fact, it is a valuable exercise to explore the bounds of lexical productivity. (ix)

Castel and Westfall concur, maintaining that there persists a dearth of Cree language teaching materials, including an unabridged Cree dictionary for all of the Cree dialects. As well, they state that "Creating a large Cree dictionary is a monumental task, in part because Cree is a highly inflectional language with an infinite number of

verbs and nouns" (Castel and Westfall xxxv). These observations prove two things: first, Cree has a fertile and incalculable lexicon and second, a dictionary can only accomplish so much in language revitalization. We must, therefore, absolutely defer to fluent speakers in our language preservation efforts.

## *nohtâwiy opîkiskwewin:* Father Tongue

While the linguists argue
over the *ikawi* suffix
and the indefinite actor form,
debating the curiosities
of active or passive voice
in Cree, I yearn to learn
real Cree words, am eager to hear
*Nehiyawewina itwewina* in the air.
Want to hear your voice.

Food words like bread and tea
and water—
*pahkwesikan, maskihkîwâpoy,*
*ekwa nipiy.*

Words for tree and bud and leaf—
*mistikw, oskimisk, ekwa nîpiy.*

Seasonal words for winter, spring,
summer, and fall—*pipon, miyoskamin,*
*nîpin, ekwa takwâkin.*

Weather words like snow and rain,
sunshine and wind—
*kôna ekwa kimiwan*
*pîsimw ekwa yôtin.*

More food words like cookie,
tomato, and cheese—
*wîhkipahkwesikanis,*
*kihcihokiniy, ekwa*
*âpakosîsimîciwin.*

Nature words for lake, mountain,
prairie—*sâkahikan,*
*asinîwaciy, paskwâw.*
How to say picnic and camping—
*papamîc'sowin ekwa kapesiwin.*
How we always picked bottles
when we went picnicking or camping—
*kâkike ekîmôsâhkinamâhk*
*môteyâpiskwa ispî*
*ekîpapamîc'soyâhk*
*ahpô enatawikapesiyâhk.*

How the sky is blue just now,
when it's been grey for so long.
*esîpihkwâk kîsikw anohc*
*mâka kinwes ekîpihkonâkwahk.*

I want to hear words for car and canoe
and toboggan and cradleboard—
*sehkepayîs ekwa cîmân*
*napakitâpânâskw ekwa tihkinâkan.*
Baby, boy, girl, man, and woman—
*oskawâsis, nâpesis, iskwesis, nâpew, ekwa iskwew.*
Boyfriend and girlfriend—
*nîcimos ekwa nîcimos.*

Kinship terms like mother and father—
*nikâwiy ekwa nohtâwiy.*
Grandmother and grandfather—
*nôhkom ekwa nimosôm.*
Sister and brother—
*nîcisan ekwa nîtisan.*
Auntie and uncle—
*nikâwîs ekwa nohcâwîsimaw.*

If only I had stopped long enough
to say "my girl," or "my boy,"—
*"nîcanis" ekwa "nikosis."*

Words for old woman and old man—
*nôhcokwesis ekwa kiseyinîsis.*

Words for hard and soft,
loud and quiet—
*emaskawâk ekwa eyôskâk*
*esôhkihtâkwahk ekwa*
*kiyâmewisiwin.*

Words for the ground is hard—
*emaskawahcâk,*
the silence is loud—
*esôhkihtâkwahk kipihtowewin,*
your voice soft and quiet—
*emiyotâmoyan ekwa eyôskîtâkwak*
*ekwa ekâmwâtahk.*

You always spoke so softly
like a steady rain on parched land.
*kâkike ekîṃanâcimiyâhk*
*tâpiskôc kimiwan,*
*epahkipestâk ispîhk*
*epâhkwacâk.*

Maybe that's why you sound
so far away now—
*kiyâwihtâkosin anohc.*
Verbs for listening and persevering—
*enitohtawiyan ekwa ehâhkameyihtamoyan,*
and loving and raising children—
*ekîsâkihiyâhk ekwa*
*kîya ekwa nikâwînân*
*enihtâwôseyek.*
Words for birth and death and funeral—
*ekînihtâwikiyan, mâka*
*anohc epônipimâtisiyan*
*ekwa ekînahinitâhk.*

Verbs for kind and just
and humble and soft-spoken—
*ehokisewâtisiyan*
*ekwa ekwayaskwâtisiyan,*
*etapahteyimisoyan*
*ekwa emiyopîkiskweyan.*

The verb for soft-hearted—
*eyoskâtisiyan,*
and how you had a soft spot
in your heart for all
the Cree people—
*ekîyoskitehestawacik*
*kahkiyaw Nehiyawak.*

Verbs for generous and caring—
*esaweyimacik ekwa enâkateyimacik.*
Words for thoughtful and oh,
such good Cree speech—
*ekîhkâhkâkîcihiweyan,*
*ekîmiyohtâkosiyan*
*ispî ekînehiyaweyan.*

Words for being so good
at so many things—
*ekînahîyan mistahi kîkway.*

Words for sadness and regret—
*nipîkiskâtisin ekwa ekîsinâteyihtamâtân.*
Because sickness stole your speech
and I came too late to listen—
*osâm itâspinewin*
*ehotinahk kipîkiskwewin,*
*osâm kikîpihtowân*
*ekwa môya kimwesiskâtin*
*kanitohtâtân.*

Yet now you're whispering
and I'm listening—
*ahpô piko anohc kikâkîmowân*
*ekwa enanahihtâtân.*

***Tawâstew***

Above your hospital bed a sign:
*Tawâw.*
An Irish chaplain visits us,
reads the other sign: *Ceud mile foilte.*
A hundred thousand welcomes, she says,
then tells us she learned Gaelic
as a child. *Tawâw* says the sign
in the language you learned as a child,
*Nehiyawewin*, beside the Gaelic welcome.

She sings a song in Gaelic,
about a little boat
looking for a safe harbour,
a haven with an opening.
*Tawâw*, just like the word says,
there is room, always room for one more.

We float on this metaphor
knowing that the Creator
makes room for you.

*etehtapahipeyâhk*
*anima nipîhk kâhâstekaminiyik,*
*ekiskeyimâyâhk Kisemanitow*
*kitawayâstamâk kîsikohk.*

You walk through the opening,
having not walked for nearly a year.
*kisâpohtawehtân.*

Relief comes slowly, gently,
as an ending opens the beginning,
as we know you surpassed your suffering.
The Creator
*kitawayâstamâk kîsikohk*

We hear this gracious
Innkeeper beckoning,
"*Tawâw. Mahtesa pîhtokwe. Api.*" [15]
"Welcome. Please come in. Sit."

The passage is open, safe.
*Tawâstew.*

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[15] Native Studies 152, Fall 2001.

***ewîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwewin***
**Chapter Three: Language Family**

An Aboriginal language speaker once told me it hurt him when non-Native people benefit from *his* language and *his* culture. Perhaps the historical hurts made it too difficult to understand my motivation to learn Cree arises from my maternal Cree lineage and because while my late father was not a *Nehiyaw* he grew up with *Nehiyawak* at Frog and Fishing Lakes and learned *Nehiyawewin* from elderly Cree women. *Nehiyawak*, young and old, spoke Cree to Dad.

*ninohtenehiyawikiskinohamâkosin osâm ekîpakaskînehiyawet nohtâwîpan âta môya enehiyawit, wîya emôniyâwit, ekwa nikâwiy ehâpihtawikosisâniskwewit mâka môya enehiyawet. ekînisitohtahk Nehiyawewin osâm nohtâwîpan ekîwîcôhpikîmât Nehiyawâsisak ayîkisâkahikanihk ekwa pakicahwânisihk ekwa ekîwîcimecawemât. ekwa mîna kîpîkiskwâtik aniki Nehiyawâsisak. pâskac ekîpîkiskwâtikot aniki kehtehayak wâwîs ôyehkâk nôcikwesiwak. aniki ayisiyiniwak, oskâyimwak ekwa kehtehayak, ekînehiyawemototâkot.*

David Treuer, in "Jibwaa-ozhibii'igewin," the editor's introduction to "Indigenous Languages and Indigenous Literatures," the special issue of *The American Indian Quarterly* (2006), contemplates the use of Native languages in texts. He compares the status that Latin has historically enjoyed in Western literature to the use of Native languages in literature in North America:

> To know Latin was to possess cultural capital, and to sprinkle it in speech and writing was a way of spending it to ensure one's status among the ruling and intellectual classes.
>
> Given that the most vocal proponents of Native languages are writers and critics, most of whom do not actually speak their languages, does not Ojibwe or Lakota or Dené function in the same way? (8)

Treuer observes that where legal and academic writing might be punctuated with Latin, Native literature, prose, and poetry, contains only a "scattering or words and phrases" (9). In defiance, he privileges the Ojibwe text of his introduction, placing it before the English translation. He laments the use of Native words in Native literature as failing to legitimize Native languages by suggesting that non-fluent writers of an Indigenous language flaunt cultural wisdom without revealing this knowledge to the reader.

Treuer points to Winona LaDuke's *Last Standing Woman* as an example of the erroneous use of Ojibwe: only part of the English translation provided in her text agrees with the Ojibwe. Treuer argues that the author expected her readers not to be Ojibwe speakers and not, therefore, able to see the serious errors in translation. He asks several penetrating questions of those of us writing in Native languages:

> How can our Native languages be important to us if we do not take the same care with them as we do when we craft our English? Do we include our Native languages in our texts only to use them to create our own authority? If that is the case, are Native languages used to exclude the reader? Are they activated primarily and counter-intuitively because few understand them? (9)

Treuer's concerns challenge me. Such disregard for the integrity of language and translation may well have motivated the Native speaker's disapproval of my efforts to learn *Nehiyawewin*. For this reason, I consult a fluent Cree speaker and writer for all my work in *Nehiyawewin*. Both the need for cultural respect and scholarly intent demand this degree of commitment, including the risks I take to commit errors, sound odd, and to be ridiculed for my lack of fluency.

To teach in the Department of Classics, an aspiring academic must study Latin and Greek; to teach in the departments of French, German, Japanese, and others one

must study those languages. Yet, it is not necessary to achieve fluency in a Native language to teach Native literature or in Native Studies departments because there are so few fluent speakers certified to teach Aboriginal languages and there is an urgent need for books written entirely in these languages, such is the extent to which dominating tongues have silenced these voices. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer argue that this scarcity of teaching materials obstructs the reconstruction of Native languages:

> A problem for teaching all Native American languages is that we lack the choice of instructional materials common and even taken for granted in teaching Spanish, French, Latin, Greek, and other languages with histories of literacy and academic instruction. (86)

While it is true that many of these Aboriginal languages have enjoyed a written history for less than a century or two, the Canadian government's recent decision to cheapen the previous regime's commitment to Aboriginal language revitalization articulates an eloquent disdain for arguably one of the most vital aspects of Aboriginal culture. Chief Dave Crate of the Fisher River First Nation in central Manitoba recognizes the nuances of Aboriginal language renewal when he acknowledges "that we can't be reliant on government, just in terms of the priorities that governments set. And language to them is a low priority, at least First Nation languages. And that being the case, we have to step up our efforts" (Language Conference, Winnipeg, October 2006). The growing chorus of Native language activists who study their ancestral tongues, in their home communities or by attending evening classes at the local university, college, or friendship centre, contributes vital energy to rescuing Aboriginal languages.

Learning Cree and writing this thesis have everything to do with my family

and who I am, even if my Great Uncle Dave told me in a recent letter that Grandma told him years ago her ancestors were Saulteaux/Ojibwa, even if Dad sometime in the last six years since I started studying Cree said that as far as he was concerned the bloodlines are so thin we are not Native anyhow, even if I heard someone say once that learning Cree must be an "unsatisfying endeavour." I cannot argue with my Dad: I am not Native and I make no pretence to be.

I have questioned myself continuously throughout this project, and still feel the need to justify my existence in Cree country, or, at the very least, in Cree literature. Not quite a year ago, at the Celebration of Aboriginal Literature, hosted by the Stanley Milner Library in downtown Edmonton and the University of Alberta Bookstore, I approached the poet Gregory Scofield to tell him I shared his Cree, Scottish, and Hudson Bay Company background. I was encouraged to see someone contemplating comparable identity issues in his writing, and I was moved by the hypnotic and breathtaking quality of his voice as he read his poetry. Like me, Scofield emerges from a multi-voiced, many-layered lineage. There is a remarkable fluidity of identity in the early twentieth century, particularly for those with mixed European-Aboriginal histories in Canada, and Scofield's poem "Between Sides" surely speaks to this quest for self-understanding:

> Where do I belong, way up north?
> The first white trader
> Must have felt this way
>
> on the reserve  a curio being looked over

my skin defies either race I am neither Scottish

or Cree. (1-6)

Scofield subverts the grammatically correct "neither-nor" in favour of "neither-or." In other words, he is and he is not, Scottish and Cree. Just like me. To my own Cree and Scottish lineage, however, I can add Ojibwa, English, and Norwegian. Despite latching onto the instinct that our "mixedness" might be the hope for humanity in defiance of a predatory appetite for purity that has growled incessantly throughout the twentieth century, I tread gently to avoid appropriating Cree culture or Cree stories in my work here.

At the end of the Celebration of Aboriginal Literature I had but a minute or two to speak to Scofield to share my struggle. His response surprised me when he said that I did not need his permission to do my work. I realized Scofield had spoken a truth, a candor I remembered when I decided to give myself permission to write this thesis. I knew I had to overcome a crushing writer's block the magnitude of learning an oral language had presented. For this reason, I wrote "The Road to Writer's Block (A Poem to Myself),"[16] and have granted myself consent each day since to carry on writing other pieces, in *Âkayâsîmowin ekwa Nehiyawewin*—English and Cree.

Both Treuer and Scofield defend cultural territory in Native literature that I lack. As I have maintained throughout I commit myself to this task with humility, staking no claim to indigeneity, asserting no authority. While I can construct a grammatically sound written sentence and vocalize the words in that sentence repeatedly until I am close to sure I can pronounce them publicly, my oral comprehension and vocabulary are limited, given the textual focus of my Cree

[16] See the introduction to this thesis.

language studies in an academic environment. Five Cree dictionaries, two English dictionaries, and the *Plains Cree Grammar Guide and Glossary*, amongst a host of other texts, crowd my desk as I write. I am willing to risk a slip of the tongue, or the pen, because the conversation is too important not to participate in. But I take these risks cautiously, respectfully, attending carefully to grammar and morphosyntax, rehearsing the poems many times to ensure correct pronunciation, and seeking verification for my work from a fluent Cree speaker and writer.

The similarity of these two Cree words strikes me as significant, *wanitonâmo* and *wanotinamâso*, meaning to commit a slip of the tongue and to take the wrong thing for oneself, respectively (Wolvengrey 1:229). The *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary, alperta ohci kehtehayak nehiyaw otwesamâkewasinahikan*, provides a number of glosses on the English word appropriate, including *otinamâsiw*, "s/he unjustly appropriates it for herself/himself" (249). Wolvengrey et al. work in Saskatchewan, perhaps explaining the slightly different spelling and pronunciation there.

*môya enohtehotinamâsoyân ekwa môya enohtewanitonâmoyân*. I want neither to take something that is not mine, nor to commit a slip of the tongue.

So I write *Ninitâhtâmon Kititwewiniwâwa (*I Borrow Your Words) for Cree people, those who speak Cree and those who do not.

## *Ninitâhtâmon Kititwewiniwâwa*: I Borrow Your Words

*môya ninohtewanitohten ispîhk nehiyawascikeyâni*
*ahpô nehiyaweyâni. ninitaweyihten*
*kânisitohtâtakok kinehiyawîhtwâwiniwâwa*
*kipîkiskwewiniwâwa.*

I mean no wrong in writing
or speaking your language. I mean
to understand you on your terms,
in your words.

*tahto itwewin emiyonâkwahk*
*tâpiskôc yîkopîwiw niwâsenamânihk ôma ekisik*
*kîkisep kîwetinohk. tahto cahkasinahikan*
*isinâkwan tâpiskôc mîkwan wâsenamânihk.*

Each word intricately embroidered
like the frost on my window this cold,
northern morning. Each inflection
a feathered essence on the glass.

*tahto itwewin itihtâkwan tâpiskôc piyesîs enikamot*
*mayaw ekitoyek. tânehki*
*kânohtehotinamâsoyân*
*kikitohcikewiniwâw?*

Each word a song bird as soon
as you speak it. How
could I possibly steal
your music?

*kitasotamâtitinâwâw*
*môya ewanotinamâsoyân.*
*ôki mîkwanwak môya*
*ekiscâyâki.*

I give you my word;
I won't take what's not mine.
These feathers on my window,
your words.

*nikanitohten kikitohcikewiniwâw*
*itwewina tâpiskôc piyesîsak kâ takahkihtâkosicik,*
*ehohpahocik, enikamocik, onikamowiniwâwa*
*ehitweyit, ekisteyihtâkosicik, emiyohtâkwahki kâkîkisepâyâyik.*

I will listen for your music,
winged words of warblers, swooping
mightily in song, meters
of meaning, melodies of the morning.

I return your words, thanking
you for loaning them to me.
Thank you my Cree friends, all my friends,
may we speak again.

*kâwekimiyitinâwâw kititwewiniwâwa kinanâskomitinâwâw*
*ehawihiyek.*
*ay hai nitôtem'tik Nehiyawak, kahkiyaw nitôtem'tik*
*kîhtwâm kapîkiskwâtitonaw.*

*Nehiyawewin*[17] is a straight-standing language, *tâpiskôc wâkinâkanak*, just like the Tamarack tree. Cree and Algonquian country is home to the Tamarack, and to me. My recent awareness of our colonial history, the complexities and deceits of the treaty process in Canada, and the wild mobility of modern culture, cause me some anxiety when I say that Cree country is my home. Even so, I take considerable pride in saying I came into this life about six miles from where I sit as I write this. *nikînihtâwikin nân'taw nikotwâsik mistik ohci ôte*. This Tamarack tree germinated in her parents' home and then in *nôhkom owîkiwiniyiw*—her grandmother's home, and uprooting a Tamarack tree shows a certain disregard for home.

Some years ago I asked my Dad not to speak Cree. This Tamarack tree caught the scourge of ignorance from the world around her. I was mad at Dad because he spoke Cree to people who came to the door or telephoned, and he knew that we, his family, could not understand what he said when *ekînehiyawet*. *Nehiyawak* telephoned him and came to the door because Dad bought and sold used furniture, and he often moved people with his truck. Many of the people who bought beds, mattresses, or a set of table and chairs came from the inner city where they lived in poverty. They could furnish their humble homes because *nohtâwiy môniyâw nâpew pakaskinehiyawew ekwa ekîhatâwâket âpacihcikana ohci namôya ohci weyisihtâsow*. My father was a white man who spoke Cree very well and sold furniture at fair prices. In the dominant society my father was a blessing for both his ability to speak Cree and for his true understanding of Cree culture. Unfortunately, I did not understand this a long time ago. Somehow a big grey cloud hung over our family of Tamarack

[17] I wrote an earlier draft of this essay for Native Studies 352, University of Alberta, March 2004.

trees.

The winding path I have walked, to this place of understanding my father, has matured me the way a sapling gradually lengthens in the forest of Tamaracks around her. I understand my study of *Nehiyawewin* as a rain shower and a sunburst over a Tamarack, all at once.

When my father passed away from ALS he was sixty-nine and had been married to Mom for forty-five years. Dad showed a deep courage throughout his life, to the very end. His ability to negotiate the monolithic barrier between *Nehiyaw'isîhcikewin ekwa Môniyâw'isîhcikewin*, Cree culture and white culture, provides a model for us all to emulate. The very best decision my Dad made to reconcile this in between space, something we call "liminal space" in higher academia and *tawâyihk* in *Nehiyawewin*, was to marry Mom. Dad did not marry Mom because of her Native heritage; they married each other because they loved each other. Mom tells the story of how impressed she felt when she and Dad dated. Dad had gone to Europe as a reconnaissance photographer while still under the age of majority. He met Mom at Victoria Composite High School, here in Edmonton, after he returned from overseas. One time Dad showed Mom some photographs of himself and some comrades playing cards in a bar. All the other men in Dad's company had beer bottles or other sorts of liquor in front of them. Mom asked Dad why he did not have a drink. Dad said, "I don't drink." Mom grew up in an alcohol-free home and she appreciated the merit of my Dad, a man who did not imbibe. Now, I have learned to say, "I don't drink," in *Nehiyawewin*: *"môya niminihkwân."*

Notwithstanding their often very trying circumstances, my parents raised me

and my younger siblings to live as healthy, caring, humble people. None of us obsesses about material goods and affluence. We are a strong, close family, a circle of Tamarack trees withstanding tempests and troubles we could not have anticipated. We gather at least once a month, for a potluck supper, usually in my parents' home. We love each other and care for each other, just as we share each other's joy and pain. From my parents I have learned this: *ekâ wîhkâc pôme. âhkameyimo. ekwa mîna kiyâm, namananitaw*. Never give up. Persevere. And things will be okay.

The tenacity of Mom's and Dad's Tamarack roots has kept us together as a family and we are strong, strong, strong.

One of the worst things that happened to Dad was a severe beating he received just before Christmas one year. On 17 December 1997, the doorbell of my parents' home rang at about 10:30 in the morning. When Dad answered the door the young man's query about a used bed surprised my father because people usually phoned before coming to buy used furniture. But Dad put on his boots and coat anyway, and then he and the young man went out to the garage. The door to Dad's garage does not have a doorknob; rather, it has a deadbolt and higher up a hasp and padlock. Just as Dad unlocked the deadbolt and padlock, two more thugs jumped from around the corner of the garage and the three of them beat my father until he lost consciousness. They bound his wrists and ankles with duct tape and left him there, face down on the cold cement floor of the garage. Possibly they believed they had killed him, or at least they left him there to die. Dad was a tired and troubled Tamarack tree who had lost all his needles, bent over in a winter blizzard.

Dad lay there unconscious, in the middle of December, for two hours before

he regained consciousness. Mom had gone for lunch with her friend and could not notice Dad had not returned from the garage. Fortunately, Dad had a phone in the garage, with a number different than their home phone inside the house. He could not unbind himself so somehow he wiggled his way over to the telephone. He must have had to knock the phone onto the floor so he could dial. My brother lived with my parents then and was on the telephone when Dad tried calling in. My grandmother lived in a suite in the basement of my parents' home and had her own telephone number, two additional and fortunate particulars in this story. Dad phoned her. Somehow, despite the terrible blows to his head, he had the clarity of mind not to frighten Grandma, telling her only that he had cut his hand and would she please go upstairs and tell Cameron to go out and help him.

My brother came out right away. Dad's attackers had closed and locked the padlock on the garage door. The deadbolt was not locked so Cameron could push and slightly open the door, just enough to see Dad lying in a pool of blood on the cement floor. This upset my brother so much that he could not remember the combination to unlock and open the door. My Dad talked Cameron through the combination to unlock the lock. Cameron unbound my Dad, took him in the house, and phoned an ambulance. Cameron then contacted Mom at the restaurant. Mom went immediately to the hospital that had admitted Dad.

Dad suffered a severe concussion and shocking bruising. In time he recovered from this vicious attack but about a year later he retired from buying and selling used furniture, and from moving people with his truck.

*Wîyakâc*. This was a regrettable loss for my Dad.

I tell this story because it demonstrates Dad's struggle to find a place in *Môniyâw'isîhcikewin*. When Mom and Dad became *nakisk onekihikomâwak*, foster parents, or *parents for awhile*, I looked closer at who we were as a not-white, not-Indian family. Mom worked as a nurse for thirty-seven years, most of it as a neonatal nurse. She has the precious combination of technical skills and compassion. When she and Dad first cared for foster children they mostly looked after Native children. One of the foster children came to our family *namôya epewîkit nakisk. mâka epewîtokwemikoyâhk nîstanaw askiy*. But she did not live with us for just *a little while*, she lived with us for twenty years. She is my foster sister but I call her my sister because she has been a loved and valued member of my family for more than twenty-four years. To honour my sister's privacy, I have decided not to include her story here. I believe hers is an important story that needs telling, but it is enough that I talk about it to those I trust, those who will respond in the most human way they know how. If this was my story, and only my story, I would tell it here. But the story belongs to my family and I must respect their, and especially my sister's, right to keep it close. This story I choose not to tell is both a non-Native and a Native story, and it is almost the same story Thomas King includes in his afterword to *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. In "Private Stories" King says, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (153). So if you want to hear my story, our story, ask me about it. Do not be afraid, for I will talk to anyone who cares enough to hear it. And if my, our story, is too hard to hear, please read "Private Stories," for Sam's story is very similar to my sister's story. Mom and Dad, however, somehow kept it all together while raising my sister to adulthood.

Someone took something from my sister, that one, the one who came to live with us for twenty years, *kâpewîtokwemikoyâhk nîstanaw askiy*. I cannot name the taker, for that would reveal too much of her story. In not naming the taker, however, I do not implicate my father, his parents, or my mother's father, all *Môniyâwak* who gave so much. My Dad, grandparents, and many other non-Native people have worked in concert with their Native neighbours, living peaceful lives in defiance of an insidious agenda that would have us exist otherwise. I have two vivid examples in my own family. My paternal grandparents were both non-Native. My Grandfather McIlwraith defied both the provincial and federal governments in the 1940s in their directive to prohibit Cree students at Frog Lake from speaking their mother tongue. His compromise, Cree in the morning and English in the afternoon, resulted in termination of his employment as a teacher in Alberta. The federal government instructed Grandpa Mc to go to Alert Bay, British Columbia if he wished to teach in Canada again. While they still lived at Frog Lake, my paternal grandparents witnessed a terrible tragedy. A young boy suffered fatal gunshot wounds while running with a loaded shotgun. Grandma Mc comforted the boy but he died there, cradled in her arms.

*namôya otinamâsowak kahkiyaw môniyâwak.* Not all white people take.

Nonetheless, I can see how Indian people in Canada must have felt badly toward the European people who came to take and settle on lands that once ran with buffalo and wolves. I share the anger of Native (and white) people who see oil and gas companies immorally wasting fresh water in very much the same way robe traders on the prairies in the mid-nineteenth century slaughtered buffalo wholesale, so

that the blood of those great beasts flowed like the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy*. I understand that I am implicated somehow when I use public transit, or once again purchase and drive a car when I complete this thesis and get work. I sink into deep confusion when I hear the frustration of Euro-Canadians who cannot see past the cultural divide and struggle to understand what looks to them like laziness.

I feel like a Tamarak caught in between a Blue Spruce and a Black Spruce or a Prairie Crocus caught between a Petunia and a Tiger Lily.

How could I fail to understand my father's finesse in navigating this in-between space? I think of his mutually respectful relationship with my mother's mother. I want to comment on this because occasionally Cree people tell me that mother-in-law and son-in-law are not supposed to converse in their culture, when I tell them about how well my Dad and Grandma got along. In fact, Dad welcomed his mother-in-law into his home when his father-in-law passed away. Thirteen years later Grandma moved into a furnished suite in my parents' home. One of the perks of this arrangement, perhaps secretly planned by Dad, was the aroma of fresh, baked bread and cinnamon buns rising from Grandma's suite.

***Pahkwesikan***

How Grandma baked the best bread
between Red River Colony
and Beaver Mountain House.[18]

Dad approaching Grandma and Grandpa
asking permission to marry their daughter.
Because he loved Mom, loved Grandma's bread,
and maybe Grandma could speak a little Cree.

I only heard Grandma speak
one Cree word. She baked
the best bread west of Red River.

*ekîmiyopahkwesikanihket*
*mâh-mâwaci pâhkisimotâhk*
*mihkwâkamîw sîpîhk.*

August 1975. Mom and Dad
married nearly fifteen years
and Grandpa passes on.
Dad welcomes Grandma into his home
thirteen years before it's necessary.
"When it's time and you're ready," he says,
"you have a home in our home."

How Grandma baked all those dozens
of loaves for Ack Hall and the Sigurdsons
as a teenaged Métis girl
on the wide Saskatchewan prairie.
The way Ack Hall and the Sigurdsons
find their way into this poem.
Like the way Grandma
took her bread-baking into Beaver
Mountain House and Mom's and Dad's house.

*ekîmiyopahkwesikanihket*
*mâh-mâwaci pâhkisimotâhk*
*mihkwâkamîw sîpîhk.*

---

[18] Fur trading companies often named their smaller forts "houses" (Hannon 213). The Cree people called Fort Edmonton "*Amiskwacîwâskahikan*," Beaver Mountain House, because of the Beaver Hills in the vicinity of Fort Edmonton (Waugh et al. 295).

Winter 1988.
How Grandma didn't trust
the modern oven, electric heat
faulty, by hook or by crook.
She'd open the door and stick her arm
in, testing the temperature,
remembering the wood-warmth
of Ack's oven. Sixteen loaves at a time,
her house, and now Mom's and Dad's house,
a big bread oven emanating
heat and yeast and toasty love.

I don't know how much Cree she
spoke, but I do know Grandma baked
the best bread west of Red River.
*namôya nikiskeyihten ekînehiyawet*
*nôhkom, mâka enisitaweyihtamân*
*ekîmiyopahkwesikanihket*
*mâh-mâwaci pâhkisimotâhk*
*mihkwâkamîw sîpîhk.*

Christmas 1998. Breakfast table
arrayed with porridge, bacon,
chokecherry jam and bread the colour
of a Saskatchewan wheat field, bread fresh
and warmhearted as a prairie harvest.
Grandma thanks God for life and food
and family, says "Amen," then says
"*pahkwesikan.*" Dad, her son-in-law,
sitting kitty-corner to her, the only one
who understands *pahkwesikan*,
passes *nôhkom* the bread.
How Grandma tells the story
of bread on the table when she
was a girl. Bread neatly sliced,
and ten kids hurly-burlying
for the crust. One brother grabs
the heel, sticks it in his armpit,
returns it to the plate. Another
brother seizes another heel, licks
it, returns it to the plate.
After that, no one wants the crust.

The way my sister knows how
to bake bannock because Grandma
taught her. The way I bake bread

in the clay oven at Fort Edmonton,
tell visitors that the Scots brought
bannock over here from over there.
*âkayâsîwak, môya ôki*
*ôhâkayâsîmowak, ôki*
*epîkiskwecik anima kotak*
*pîkiskwewin, ôki*
*ekîpesiwâcik pahkwesikan*
*ôte ohci ekote.*

The way I explain that my Cree
foremothers taught my Orkney
forefathers about *pimîhkan.*
Beaver Mountain House, a towering
pemmican processing plant.

*pimîhkan ehohcît ôte.*
*pahkwesikan ehohcît ekote.*

Pemmican from over here.
Bread from over there.

November 2006.
Winter hurries in hard this year.
How I notice *pahkwesikan* near
*pahkwenew* in the dictionary,
*pahkwesikan* meaning bread,
*pahkwenew* meaning to break
a piece off by hand, as in bread.[19]
How I wonder, which came first
the bread or the breaking.

I have pounded meat,
poured warm water over yeast,
learned that to be a family,
it's okay to be from over here
and to be from over there.

*ekîhîwahikanihkeyân,*
*ekîpahkwesikanihkeyân,*
*ekîkiskinohamâkosiyân*
*kawîtisânîhitoyâhk*
*kiyâm kahohciyâhk ôte*
*ekwa kiyâm kahohciyâhk ekote.*

---

[19] Wolvengrey, Arok, *Nehiyawewin itwewina: Cree: Words Volume 1* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2001) 165.

My father and my grandmother leave me warm and mouth-watering memories to commemorate them by.

In their Cree language workbook, Hunter and Karpinski include a story called "The Man and His Mother-In-Law":

> A certain man's wife was pregnant, and the day came when his wife had labor pains. She was about to have a baby. The husband went by team and wagon to fetch his mother-in-law, who was a mid-wife.
>
> When he arrived at her house, the mother-in-law was alone at home. He stood at the door with his head down and noticed a cat sitting by the stove. "Cat," he said, "my wife is sick. Would one come to help her?"
>
> With that, he went outside to wait. The mother-in-law immediately took her medicine bag and climbed into the wagon, without looking at her son-in-law. Both travelled home without speaking to each other. (143)

The Cree even have a word for a parent or child-in-law "to whom speech is avoided": *manâcimâkan* (Wolvengrey 1:87). The *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary: alperta ohci kehtehayak nehiyaw otwestamâkewasinahikan* provides a slightly different gloss on this word, defininining *manâcimâkan* as a "respected in-law" (70).

I contemplate this cultural narrative not so much to emphasize difference, but to consider the diverse ways of being human, the innumerably creative strategies people choose to get on in this world. Likely my father knew and understood this way of being with one's in-law in Cree culture, having spent most of his youth living in a Cree community. I only learned of this recently, and appreciate its attention to respect, the kind of caution one reserves for one's elders, in particular elders of the opposite gender. Not surprisingly, the Cree even have a word for "to ask for a woman's hand in marriage": *nitomiskwewe*. Certainly, my grandparents were pleased when Dad approached them to request their permission to marry their daughter and enter their family. *kehcinâ nikehtehayimak kîmiyweyihtamwak ispîhk nohtâwiy*

*ekînitomiskwewâtât otânisimiwâwa*. And Dad was very pleased when Mom said yes to him, even if he had to wait three years until she graduated from nursing. *ekwa kîmiyweyihtam nohtâwiy ispîhk nikâwiy ekîhitikot "ehâ," ahpô piko ekîpehât nisto askiy ispî ekîkiskinohamâkosiyit enohtemaskihkîwiskwewiyit.* And so a foundation was laid, a family for my siblings and me.

Consider again, the length of these Cree words and the number of inflections. The last word—*e-nohte-h-o-maskihkîw-iskwewi-yit* contains no fewer than five inflections and two complete words, one a noun and the other a verb, in the construction of one word. These inflections paralyse stereotypes of *Nehiyawewin* and other Indigenous languages as being all the same, unable to express modern concepts, and having limited lexicons (Steckley and Cummins 22-31). *Nehiyawewin* belongs to the Algonquian language family, as do a number of other Aboriginal languages including Ojibwe, Blackfoot, Mi'kmac, Innu, Maliseet, Abenaki, Delaware, and Potawatomi among others (Campbell 153). English, German, Dutch, Frisian, and a number of Scandinavian languages all belong to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family, but they are not mutually intelligible and are not, therefore, the same language. For example, the noun father in English shares the same origin as *Vater* in German and *pater* in Latin. Similarly, the nouns—rather, the kinship terms—for my grandmother and my grandfather in Cree, *nôhkom* and *nimosôm* are cognates with these same nouns in Ojibwe, *nôkomiss* and *nimishomiss* (Baraga 119-120), and Delaware, *nóohum* and *nŭ=moxóomus* (O'Meara 479). Just as languages in the Indo-European family are related but different, so are Cree and other Algonquian languages unique to each other because, unless one is bi- or trilingual,

speakers of one Aboriginal language do not necessarily understand speakers of another Native tongue. There is, in fact, greater linguistic diversity here in Aboriginal Canada where we have eleven language families compared to Europe which has three language families (Steckley and Cummins 23).

Another way that *Nehiyawewin* invalidates misconceptions of its simplicity is in its proven ability to adapt to changing circumstances and modern phenomena. Consider just a few examples of fairly new terms:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| airplane | *pimihâkan* | (Wolvengrey 2: 262) |
| bus driver | *opimohtahiwew* | (Wolvengrey 2: 298) |
| computer | *kawicikepayik* | (Waugh et al.: 497) |
| electric | *wâsaskocepayîs* | (Wolfart and Ahenakew 264) |
| equipment | *âpacihcikan* | (Wolfart and Ahenakew 267) |
| taxation | *tipahikehewewin* | (Waugh et al.: 547) |
| terrorism | *sekihtasowin* | (Waugh et al.: 547). |

Clearly, *Nehiyawewin* has no trouble articulating contemporary concepts. Many Cree language scholars have also capably challenged the misinterpretation of its inadequacies in terms of its lexicon. Wolfart and Ahenakew (1987) discuss this in their introduction to the *Student's Dictionary of Literary Plains Cree*, and anyone who has spent more than a little time unravelling the complexities of the four verb types, especially the transitive animate verb, and the distinctions between agglutination, compounding, noun incorporation, polysynthesis, and obviation can attest to the lexical fecundity of *Nehiyawewin*. My study of *Nehiyawewin* coincides with many things, but it is most importantly a gift that has led me straight back to the significance of my own family.

## *ewîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwewin:* Language Family[20]

*enehiyaw'kiskinohamâkosiyân*
I am learning to speak Cree
and I hear the language
rooted
in the land
not uprooted by *sôniyâw*.

Some may wish to call me *môniyâw*
because of the colour of my skin.
Let me tell you about my roots.

I learned a Cree word
and I really like it.
*kôhkom'paninawak.*
It means cucumbers.
Let me "do a derivation" for you
to illustrate
the logic of the language.

*ôhkomimâw*: root word for "grandmother,"
*nôhkom*: "my grandmother,"
*kôhkominaw*: "our grandmother."
It's been shortened to *kôhkom.*
You can already hear the logic of *Nehiyawewin.*

'*pan* means "late," "someone passed on or deceased."
So the literal translation for *kôhkom'paninawak*
is "Our late grandmothers."
But the word really means cucumbers.

"Where is the logic in *cucumbers*?" you ask.

Be patient, *nitôtem*, be patient
and I will tell you.

When you plant a cucumber seed it grows
and spreads all over the place.
A whole bunch of cucumbers all over…
when you pick them, of course, each time you pick them
new little ones will sprout and grow.

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[20] McIlwraith, Naomi. Native Studies 152, March 2002. CBC Alberta Anthology aired this poem under a different title, "I Am Learning to Speak Cree," in November 2002.

*kôhkom'paninawak* tells of the grandmother's lineage.
*nohtokwew* is "Old Woman."
An endearing term, complimentary.
See the proud Grandmother in her garden
full of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
Her lineage, rooted in the land.
Her kinfolk, cucumbers multiplying.

My mother's mother,
*nôhkom* didn't speak a lot of Cree because
she was born at a time when
*kihcôkimânâhk* told her she couldn't
be an Indian.

But Grandma planted *kôhkom'paninawak* anyway.
*nôhkom mistahi kîmîyotwâw ekîhâpihtaw'kosisâniskwewit ekwa mistahi nikîsâkihâw.*
Listen. Can you hear the lyricism in the language
of *Nehiyawak*?

*nôhkom mistahi kisâkihitin*

*ohtâwîmâw*: root word for "father,"
*kohtâwiy*: "your father."
Sweet logic says *nohtâwiy* is
"my father."

A woman once told my father
it didn't matter how well he spoke Cree,
she wouldn't like him because
he was a *môniyâw*.

*nohtâwiy namôya Nehiyaw mâka mistahi pakaskinehiyawew*
*nohtâwiy mistahi mîyotwâw môniyâw*

*nohtâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin*

*okâwîmâw*: the root word for "mother,"
*kikâwiy*: "your mother."
Logic and love tell me
*nikâwiy* is "my mother."

A colleague asked my mother, over and over,
"What nationality are you?"
"Métis," said my mother, "does it matter?"
The colleague didn't have much to say
to my mother after that.

*nikâwiy namôya nehiyawew mâka mistahi epakaskipîkiskwet sâkihiwewin*
*nikâwiy mistahi mîyotwâw ehâpihtaw'kosisâniskwewit*

*nikâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin*

This is the colour of my skin: *nitasakay wâpiskâw.*
This is the colour of my blood: *nimihko mihkwâw.*
Did you know, it's the same colour as your blood?
This is the colour of my roots: *mihkwîyiniw.*

Kinship means much in *Nehiyawewin.*

I learned a Cree word.
I quite like it.
*kôhkom'paninawak*—cucumbers.
All these little roots: they sprout, they spread,
they grow.
Language and land, logic and love, lineage and lyricism.
If you pick the cucumbers, of course,
they will spread all over the place.

*ekwa kânîmihitocik mistahi katawasisiwak.*[21]

[21] Thanks to Marjorie Memnook-White for teaching the cultural meaning of "*kôhkom'paninawak*" (March 2002).

**Translation:**

*sôniyâw*: money
*môniyâw*: a white person
*nitôtem*: my friend
*Nehiyawewin*: the Cree language
*kihcôkimânânk*: the government

*nôhkom mistahi kîmîyotwâw ekîhâpihtaw'kosisâniskwewit ekwa mistahi nikîsâkihaw:*
My grandmother was a very kind Mixed-Blood woman and I loved her very much.
*Nehiyawak*: the Cree People

*nôhkom mistahi kisâkihitin*: My Grandmother, I love you very much.
*nohtâwiy mistahi mîyotwâw môniyâw*: My father is a very kind white man.
*nohtâwiy namôya Nehiyaw mâka mistahi pakaskinehiyawew*: My father is not a Cree person but he speaks Cree brightly.

*nohtâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin*: My Father, I love you very much.

*nikâwiy namôya Nehiyawew mâka mistahi epakaskipîkiskwet sâkihiwewin:*
My mother does not speak Cree, but she speaks love very well.
*nikâwiy mistahi mîyotwâw ehâpihtaw'kosisâniskwewit*: My mother is a very kind Mixed-Blood woman.

*nikâwiy mistahi kisâkihitin:* My Mother, I love you very much.

*nitasakay wâpiskâw*: My skin is white.
*nimihkom mihkwâw:* My blood is red.
*mihkwîyiniw*: of the red people.

*ekwa kânîmihitocik mistahi katawasisiwak*: And when the ancestral spirits dance, the Northern Lights are very beautiful.

***ewîtisânîhitoyâhk ekwa epeyâhtakoweyâhk:* Relative Clause**[22]

*Nisîme*, my sister, your jokes,
those cracks you're always looking
for, cracks in the sidewalk, cracks
in the foundation, anything
to goad the gloom.
How do you do it, my sister;
how do you think so fast?
*Tân'si isi, Nisîme,*
*kikisiskâmâmitoneyihcikân?*

You're the Mother Magpie.
Such a sense of humour
have you, you don't mind
presiding over a clutch of crows.
Tell a joke, my sister, that story
the one that makes us laugh
no matter how many times
you tell it.
*Naniweyitwe, Nisîme, anima âcimowin*
*kâhâpacîhtayân kâpâhpiyâhk ahpô piko*
*ehâcimoyan tahtwâw.*

*Nisîme*, my brother, your giggle,
that one you laugh when you forget
you're an adult, yes, that one.
It tickles all who hear.
Your children, your sister's children,
adults, we're all amused
when something enchants you.
We like to hear your giggle, that one,
the one that beguiles the blahs.
*Nimiyweyihtenân*
*kapehtâtâhk epâhpisiyan,*
*Nisîme, anima pâhpisiwin,*
*ohci kâpâhpiyâhk.*

*Nisîme*, yes you, my only brother,
the one who most bears
the evidence of our Cree

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[22] "A relative clause refers to a phrase in a sentence that indicates who is doing a certain action, or specifies a particular noun with the help of demonstrative pronouns (e.g. the snare which you set). These types of phrases or clauses are dependent on the main phrase or verb to complete the sentence." Hunter, Emily and Betty Karpinski, *Plains Cree Grammar Guide and Glossary* (Edmonton: School of Native Studies, University of Alberta, 2001) 89.

inheritance, the baby blue
lumbar bruise,[23] the one who
has to explain he's not Lebanese,
but Métis. Giggle, my brother,
giggle when your funny bone itches,
and cry when your heart hurts.
It's okay my brother, giggle your child's
giggle, cry your grown man's cry.
*kiyâm Nisîme, pâhpi*
*anima pâhpisiwin,*
*tâpiskôc ana awâsis*
*kâpâhpisit;*
*mâto anima mâtowin*
*tâpiskôc ana nâpew kâmâtot.*

*Nisîme*, my younger sister,
you are the youngest and the oldest.
Borne of a different mother,
but my sister anyhow.
*Nisîme*, having borne children
yourself, and the burning worry
of a vessel filled with a history
so diagnosable it's preventable. Protect
your children from this burden, *Nisîme*.
Laugh, my sister. Celebrate
your children, those children
the ones you love, with laughter.
*manâcih kitawâsimisak*
*ohci ôma pwâwatewin.*
*pâhpi Nisîme. miyawât*
*kitawâsimisak,*
*aniki awâsisak,*
*kâsâkihacik,*
*miyawât ohci pâhpiwin.*

Your smile, my youngest sister,
could fill your children's hearts
to the brim. Fill their hearts, my sister,
with love. Leave no room
for liquid misgivings.
*sâkihiwe kitawâsimisak, Nisîme.*

Mom, *Nikâ*, I heard you say twice you wished
you had learned to speak Cree.

---

[23] Mixed blood babies of colour often exhibit a bluish mark on their backs, in the lumbar region. Unfortunately, medical experts call this phenomenon a "mongol spot" (Cordova 714).

Is that so, Mom, or have the curious
stares, restaurant chairs empty
and unavailable, neighbours
from afar, bad neighbours,
ungrateful guests, have
they discouraged you? Laugh at them,
Mom; laugh in their faces.
*pâhpih, Nikâ, pâhpih;*
*pâhpih omihkwâkaniwâwa.*

I remember you told us Mom,
when the leaves on Black Poplars turn
upwards, it will rain. Did you know,
Mom, this is a natural sign
the Cree use? Remember Dad's laugh?
Remember how his whole body
would shake with delight?
He's gone now, Mom, but remember
his laugh, that laugh, the one
that made us all feel better.
*ekînakatikoyahk anohc,*
*Nikâ, mâka, kiskisitotahk*
*opâhpiwin, anima pâhpiwin,*
*ekînaheyihtamihikoyâhk.*

All my relatives,
my nieces and nephews,
my aunties and uncles,
my cousins, my grandparents,
you, the ones who married my siblings,
the ones who came before,
the ones who will come after.

*kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanak, kîyawâw,*
*kâwîkimâyekok nîtisânak,*
*nitânisak ekwa nistimak, nitihkwatim ekwa nikosim,*
*nisikosak ekwa nôhcâwîsak,*
*nicowâmiskwewak, nitawemâw, nîtim, ekwa nikehtehayimak,*
*nistam kâkipetakosiniyek,*
*kâpetakosiniyek mwestas.*

Some of you are Cree,
some of you are not,
but we all live in Cree country.
Close your eyes for just a moment.
Listen for the rhythms

of the region,
pulse of the prairie.
Can you hear it?
Shhhh, now
*kiyâmapi, anohc*. Try to block
out all that other noise. There,
you can hear it in the dirges
of the birches, and spruces tuned
with the wind. And there,
in the declarations
of history. In the laughter
of old and young,
then and now.
Shhhh. *kiyâmapi.*
It's a pleasing refrain,
that echo,
the one that won't go away.
*mîyohtâkwanwa*
*ôhi cîstâwewina,*
*môya kâhitihtâkwahki*.

***tânisi kakîwîcipîkiskwemitoyâhk ekwa kakîmiyohtwâyâhk***
**Chapter Four: Speech Acts**

Nearly a century after *Mistahi Maskwa* (Big Bear) gave a number of historic speeches in the 1880s, a study of language called speech act theory emerged as an influential analysis of what human beings accomplish through speech. John Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) and John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay In The Philosophy Of Language* (1969) were early proponents of this effort to differentiate amongst various aspects of discourse. Austin demarcates the performative utterance from the constative, arguing that utterances meeting these two crucial criteria are performative:

> A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and
> B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as saying something (5).

Conversely, constative utterances "make statements," describe, and are verifiable as either true or false. Austin challenges the philosophical establishment all the way back to Aristotle in upsetting what "was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (1), though he concedes that performative utterances, despite their capacity for action, are subject to their own foibles. These he playfully deems "infelicities," the unhappy conditions of performative utterances that fail to accomplish their goals.

Performative utterances can go awry in a number of ways. There are two classes of unhappy performatives, "misfires" and "abuses." A misfire occurs when the speech act is uttered incorrectly or is not successfully performed, and nothing is

accomplished. Austin calls mistaken utterances misinvocations and unsuccessful performances misexecutions. Misfires such as misinvocations and misexecutions are speech acts that are "purported" or "empty," "void or without effect" (16). The second class of infelicities, that is, inapt expressions called abuses, actually do achieve something in the speech act, but as their name suggests the infelicity is "professed" or "hollow," neither "implemented" nor "consummated" (16). Austin proposes two categories of abuses; the first he labels insincerities and the second infractions or breaches (39). These "abusive" speech acts or performances are not void because they actually accomplish particular goals; but the goals are dubious and the speech acts are acted out in the absence of essential feelings, thoughts, or intentions (40). If a speaker aims to *perform* the act of apologizing but she feels differently, is not really sorry for her wrongdoing, her saying "I am sorry" is insincere. Likewise, if a speaker suggests a course of action to a friend but feels otherwise, that the action is not a good idea, this, too, is an insincerity. Perhaps a man has an insurmountable gambling debt and his friend tells him to play another round, that maybe this time he will win the jackpot. But the friend wants to get back at the gambler for having taken a job that he, himself, wanted. This advice, like the apology, is not void. Rather, these speech acts are hollow because their utterances are insincere.

In 1880 Cree chief *Payipwât*—Piapot—chaired a council of important Plains Indian chiefs, who went to Fort Walsh in southern Alberta to parley with Commissioner Irvine of the Northwest Mounted Police, Magistrate James F. Macleod, and the local Indian agent. *Mistahi Maskwa*, *Papêwêw*—Lucky Man,

*Minahikosis*—Little Pine, and several other Cree attended the meeting. Horse stealing had severely compromised the Cree's military might and *Payipwât* asked the government officials if their intentions included fulfilling treaty promises and assistance to the Cree in reclaiming their horses. *Payipwât* explained that the Cree were frustrated because it seemed the police had a penchant for arresting Cree while permitting others who stole horses from the Cree to go free. Macleod responded that the police had no jurisdiction to arrest horse thieves in Montana, but that while the Cree should not steal from ranchers or white settlers, if the Cree had their horses stolen by other tribes, "why could they simply not steal them back?" (Dempsey 96). *Payipwât* told the Cree in attendance that Macleod had said he would not arrest Cree who stole horses from other tribes. *Mistahi Maskwa*, however, wisely saw through the magistrate's speech act:

> "The police," he said, "have bidden us to make up our losses by stealing from others. I think this is bad advice, and is given because the whites want to have us killed off. The advice, if acted on, would very likely lead to collisions with other bands and result in bloodshed" (Dempsey 96—Saskatchewan Herald, 5 August 1882, paraphrased, note 52 on p. 208).

*Mistahi Maskwa* exemplified astuteness in the face of the difficulties associated with translation, starvation, and widespread unrest on the Canadian prairies. He understood not only the insincerity and hollowness of Macleod's tainted counsel, but its abuse as well.

Austin identifies a third example of an insincerity: a promise made without the intention of fulfilling it (40). In August and September 1876 Treaty Commissioner Alexander Morris met with Cree chiefs at Carlton House and Fort Pitt in Saskatchewan to negotiate the terms of Treaty 6. Commissioner Morris assured the

Carlton House Cree that they would receive many treaty benefits. These included a reserve of one square mile for each family of five, schools, prohibition of liquor, farming implements and animals, enough seed to cultivate and feed each band, silver medals and flags for the chiefs, uniforms for chiefs and councillors, fifteen hundred dollars in ammunition and twine to each reserve, twelve dollars as a bonus to each man, woman and child for agreeing to the treaty, twenty-five dollars to each chief, fifteen dollars to councillors and their families, new coats every three years to chiefs and head men to show their official status with the Queen, a medicine chest stored at the home of each Indian agent, and finally payment each year in perpetuity of twenty-five dollars to chiefs, fifteen dollars to head men, and five dollars to each man, woman, and child (Morris 206-217).

*Mistahi Maskwa* arrived late for the treaty talks at Fort Pitt and while most of the other Cree chiefs accepted the terms of the treaty he remained steadfast. We have only Lieutenant-Governor Alexander Morris's record of the events and the interpretation he received of the Cree chief's words that day; Morris does not identify the interpreter but clearly there occurred either a misfire or an abuse, and we may never know for sure which:

> The Bear said, "Stop, my friends. I never saw the Governor before; when I heard he was to come, I said I will request him to save me from what I most dread—hanging; it was not given to us to have the rope about our necks." I replied, that God had given it to us to punish murder by death, and explained the protection the police force afforded the Indians.
>
> Big Bear still demanded that there should be no hanging, and I informed him that his request would not be granted. (192-193)[24]

Dempsey suggests that because Peter Erasmus, the best interpreter around, could not be present, likely Reverend John McKay translated for *Mistahi Maskwa* at Fort Pitt

[24] Thank you to Hugh Dempsey for introducing this passage to me.

(74). As Erasmus explains, however, "The Rev. McKay had learned his Cree among the Swampy and Saulteaux. While there was a similarity in some words, and I had learned both languages, the Prairie Crees would not understand his Cree" (241). Dempsey argues that McKay failed to accurately convey *Mistahi Maskwa's* meaning, that the Cree chief did not say he was afraid he would be hanged; rather, *Mistahi Maskwa* spoke metaphorically, using "a common expression on the plains that denoted a person giving up his freedom," and adding that he would not be "lead (sic) by the neck." (74).

Two years later *Mistahi Maskwa* promised not just himself but his followers and even Commissioner Laird that he would "wait for four years before he would consider accepting treaty" (Dempsey 85). He kept his promise and he waited for four years to give the Canadian government ample time to follow through on its treaty promises. In the spring of 1882 *Mistahi Maskwa* travelled to the Indian camp in the vicinity of Fort Walsh, and found the Cree there in a pitiful state of starvation due to the destruction of the buffalo herds and the failure of the Canadian government to fully honour the treaties. The two thousand treaty Indians camped near Cypress Lake lived in rotting teepees and were malnourished by the appallingly meager rations distributed by the Northwest Mounted Police (Dempsey 106). Sarah Carter argues that even reserve Indians could not succeed at farming because the government gave them ineffectual or even broken farming implements, insufficient seed, and other supplies (134-137). It seemed as though Commissioner Irvine's words, uttered six years earlier at Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt, evaporated in the wind, hollow and without substance.

These examples of what Austin calls infelicities, speech acts that misfire in their delivery or abuse in their insincerity, are simple enough to discern, and they account for the profound misunderstandings between *Mistahi Maskwa* and the representatives of the colonial government. What happens however, when, six years later a man speaks for *four hours* before, on a cold winter day in December 1882, his sons tell him to stop talking—"*Ponwêwita*!"—and he finally signs a treaty he knows means the end of his people's right to their land and destiny? *Mistahi Maskwa* knows his words will not change the ugly reality that he must sign and we wonder what drives him to exert the energy required to harangue the treaty commissioner for this long. How well does the translator perform his duties this day?

We find another compromised translation when *Mistahi Maskwa* sits in a Regina courtroom on 3 September 1885 and responds to the charges of treason-felony for his purported involvement in the Frog Lake Massacre. F.W. Spicer is an acquaintance of *Mistahi Maskwa* and they have in the past communicated with each other in the Blackfoot language. Spicer happens to wander into the courtroom just as these charges are read out to the Cree chief. Spicer explains that in allegedly agitating against the Queen's government, *Mistahi Maskwa* is accused of attempting to appropriate her crown and dignity. Peter Hourie serves as the translator for *Mistahi Maskwa's* trial and he struggles to translate some expressions from English to Cree. Spicer explains: "Of course there is no such word in the Cree as crown, and here the trouble began. After much talk the old man turned to me in his distress and said in Blackfoot:"

> "These people all lie," he said, "they are saying that I tried to steal the Great Mother's Hat, how could I do that? She lives very far across the Great Water,

> and how could I go there to steal her hat? I don't want her hat and did not know she had one." (in Hawkes, 142-143) [25]

Clearly, translations such as the one provided by Peter Hourie can be assigned a constative designation because they are either accurate or not. This demonstrates what Austin means when he concedes that constative and performative utterances sometimes mimic each other and the "danger of our initial and tentative distinction between constative and performative utterances breaking down," complicates our ability to differentiate between them (54). While Hourie's translation lacks full truth value as a constative utterance, to what degree does he "misexecute" or "misperform" his duties? We can see the effect his difficulties have on *Mistahi Maskwa*, but what of the jury? Several times throughout the trial the prosecutor and defense lawyers ask witnesses how well they speak Cree. How well a witness *understands* Cree is even more critical to *Mistahi Maskwa's* defense. Prosecution lawyer, D.L. Scott, calls Stanley Simpson to testify about something *Mistahi Maskwa* had said:

> Q. What did you hear him say? A. He cut up a piece of tobacco, and he said he wanted his men to cut the head of the white people off the same as he cut this piece of tobacco off. He wanted the head. [26]

After William Tomkins testifies for the prosecution, defense lawyer F.B. Robertson recalls Stanley Simpson and asks him to tell the court, in Cree, what exactly *Mistahi Maskwa* said at the Battle of Frenchman's Butte. Simpson answers that he cannot say it, that he cannot understand Cree properly, but that he understood *Mistahi Maskwa* to have said this about the tobacco and the white men. Mr. Scott, attempting to clarify matters for the benefit of the Crown, proposes a test of Simpson's knowledge of Cree

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[25] I credit Hugh Dempsey for bringing F.W. Spicer's observation to my attention.

[26] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 201.

by having the translator, Peter Hourie, ask Simpson a question in Cree and have the witness respond. Simpson asks not to be tested too rigourously: "You don't want to put a very hard question to me, or perhaps I will not be able to answer it. Big Bear spoke very slowly; he always does." [27]Mr. Hourie puts the question to Stanley Simpson who responds, "I am asked by Mr. Hourie if he had given me some tobacco, or something of that sort—I cannot understand it, I don't understand enough of it." [28] After Scott asks Simpson several questions Robertson, acting for the defence, interjects:

> The words that were read to the witness were: "If the captain of the soldiers does not give us tobacco, we will cut the tops off the trees," and all you got hold of was "captain" and "tobacco."
>
> Witness.—I did not mention the word "captain," I said the "master" of soldiers. The verb is what I did not understand. [29]

Simpson's testimony edges toward the farcical and the defense lawyer protests:

> Mr. Robertson.—I wish to submit that the evidence of that conversation should be struck out. The proper evidence of such a conversation would be a proof of the words used by the prisoner, and then an expert properly qualified to translate them. That is the legal evidence of a conversation of that kind.[30]

Judge Richardson's only response is that he "may have something to say to the jury about that," [31] and the next witness is immediately sworn. The plausibility of Stanley Simpson's testimony seems evident only in his difficulties with the "verb," for he

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[27] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 201.

[28] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 201

[29] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 201-202.

[30] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 202.

[31] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 202.

may have struggled with the same syntactical irregularities that modern students of *Nehiyawewin* find so troubling with Cree verbs. There are, in fact, two verbs uttered and the translation, back into Cree is this: *Kîspin môya pîhtwâhikoyâhki cistêmâw onîkânimiwâwa aniki kâsimâkanisiwicik, kâkîskinânawak mistikwak tahkohc.* Complicating matters even further, the two verbs must be uttered in the subjunctive indicative and the subjunctive conjunct modes respectively, resulting in an advanced and intricate performative utterance in *Nêhiyawêwin*. The speaker promises to cut the tops off the trees if the captain of the soldiers does not give him and his friends tobacco. Perhaps not only Stanley Simpson's Cree is questionable, but Hourie's as well!

These examples tell us of the many possibilities for misfires and even the risk of abuses in a trial such as this one that convicted *Mistahi Maskwa*. Baptiste Fontaine testifies immediately after Stanley Simpson and following his very short time on the stand, Robertson calls Mrs. Catharine Simpson, wife of James K. Simpson. Peter Hourie continues to serve as the translator. Robertson only succeeds in asking Mrs. Simpson a few questions before the prosecutor objects to Robertson's line of questioning, saying that he believes what *Mistahi Maskwa* might have said on the morning of 2 April 1885 when Mrs. Simpson saw him should not be allowed. Mr. Robertson defends his strategy: "He went there to give her a warning, and what he said in that is really part of his conduct at the time, and that is the ground upon which I ask this." [32] Clearly, the trial is biased against *Mistahi Maskwa*, for Judge Richardson allows the kind of dubious testimony provided by Stanley Simpson and

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[32] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 203.

subject to obvious translation inaccuracies that will incriminate the Cree chief, but errs on the side of injustice by restricting testimony that might benefit the defence:

> Court.—I feel that I give you, Mr. Robertson, every reasonable latitude, but there are places where the lines must be drawn. What is it you want to ask her?
>
> Mr. Robertson.—I want to ask her if, at the time that he was giving her this warning, he said anything about the young men or his band.
>
> Mr. Scott.—I object to anything further than the warning being given. [33]

Robertson is compelled, then, to ask only, "Well, what did he do after that, or what did you do?" [34] Consider the contradiction that while Robertson understands the justification of conflating the saying of something with the doing of something, such as uttering a performative, Richardson and Scott will not. Austin has something to say about this kind of evidence:

> in the American law of evidence, a report of what someone else said is admitted as evidence if what he said is an utterance of our performative kind: because this is regarded as a report not so much of something he *said*, as which it would be hear-say and not admissible as evidence, but rather as something he *did*, an action of his. (13)

If Robertson could have proven the performative power of *Mistahi Maskwa's* warning to Mrs. Simpson, even if the Cree chief had lost influence over his band, defence counsel might have succeeded in preventing *Mistahi Maskwa's* conviction. Indeed, in reiterating his thesis and altering it somewhat, something the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida would praise, Austin resigns himself to the common trait shared by constatives and performatives: "performatives are happy or

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[33] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 204.

[34] Dominion of Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (No. 52a, Vol. XIX) (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1886) 204.

unhappy and statements are true or false, again from the side of supposed constative utterances, notably statements, we find that statements *are* liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable" (135). Austin calls warnings such as the one *Mistahi Maskwa* gave Mrs. Simpson "exercitives," performative utterances that involve the "exercising of powers, rights, or influence" (150). *Mistahi Maskwa's* trial and Robertson's failed attempt to defend him speak to the importance of Austin's speech act theory, even if philosophers only recently have moved toward agreeing on the finer points of Austin's work.

On the 25th of September 1885, François Dufresne translated for *Mistahi Maskwa* when Judge Richardson sentenced the Cree chief to three years at Stony Mountain Penitentiary after the jury convicted him of the non-capital crime of treason-felony; Dufresne narrated his interpretation to Humphrey Gratz ("Defense of Big Bear," *Western Producer* 16 June 1983, 10-11). William Cameron, who spoke as a defense witness for *Mistahi Maskwa*, provides a remarkably similar version of *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech in his biography *Blood Red The Sun*. I have chosen to translate William Cameron's interpretation back into Cree because just as Cree and other Aboriginal languages continue to decline in the early twenty-first century, *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech deserves our attention, in *Nehiyawewin*, and because as a young boy my father knew William Cameron as an old man at Frog Lake. I respect *Mistahi Maskwa's* Cree words—*Nehiyawewin itwewina*—by placing them before the English text provided by Cameron.

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*"Nititeyihten*[35] *ôma kakîhayâyân kîkway kahitweyân,"* he began slowly, *"ohci ôhi kîkwaya kâhispayik kâpesiwihikoyân ôta sakâpihkanihk*!" He spoke in his native Cree, knowing no English. He paused. Then with the earnestness, the eloquence and the pathos that never failed to move an audience, red or white, he went on to speak of the troubles of the spring.

*"Nikîkiskeyihten apisîs piko ohci ôma nipahtâkewin ôte ayîkisâkahikanihk ahpô tepiyahk piko ekîpehtamân kâmatwewek. Nikîkakwemiyotôten nakinamân kâ mâcipayiki kîkwaya. Aniki kâmwestâtahkamikisicik kâhakisocik iskonikanihk, namôya kahkîtipeyimakik ekwa wîyawâw ekîpahkikawicik omihkomiwâw ohci aniki kâwânakateyimakik. Nikîhitohtân ekîhayâyân wahiyawes ohci ayîkisâkahikanihk kâpipohk, ekîmâcîyân ekwa ekînocikinoseweyân, ispî ôma kâ-mâyahkamikahk mayeyihcikewin kamâcipayik pamwayes kapewâyonîyân. Ispî môniyâwak ekîcikawâsisicik ôta askîhk nicihciy tapiskôc ôma ociwâmihtowin. Nimihtâten ecikawâsisicik ôta ôki, kânîpawistamawicik ohci kahkîhoyotôtemistawakik.*

*"Awiyak cî kahkînîpawiw ekwa kahkîhitwew ewako ôma ekîsîhkimakik kanipahâcik awa ayamihewiyiniwa ahpô sôniyâw'kimâwa otasahkewa? Kititeyihtenâwâw ekîsîhkimakik nicayisiyiniwak kawîcihiwecik mayeyihcikewinihk. Namôya ekosi ekîhitôtamân. Ekîkitahamawakik. Nikîmihtâten ekospî ekînipahâcik aniki nâpewak ayîkisâkahikanihk, mâka tâh-tâpwe kîspin ôma mâyâcimowin ekîpehtamâhk ohci ôma nôtinitowin sîsîpi-sâkahikanihk nitaskîhkân ekîpatahôhkâticik nisôhkisiwin ekwa ekîpakwâtakik ayisk namôya ekîwîcewimak aniki kâhâpihtawikosisânicik. Namôya ahpô ciki awiyak tapiskôc ekîkimotamawak môniyâw omistatimwa. Kâkike tâkîtâpwewakeyihtamân ehoyotôtemikawiyân ohci*

[35] I thank Dorothy Thunder for verifying my translation of *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech.

*môniyâw, nîya ekwa nicayisiyiniwak nikâkîwîcihikonânak aniki kâkîweyôtisicik. Kâkike ekîhitêyihtamân metoni kwayask ôma ekîspinatamawak kâmiyotôtamân kahkiyaw ôma kahkîtotamân. Mâka anohc niwîsakitehân ekwa niteh etipâtihikâsot.*

*"Ninanâtawâpin ôma piskihcikipahikanihk ekwa ewâpahtamân âyawâk ôki etakahkâpewicik wîhkwâkaniwâwa, wîhkwâkaniwâwa nawac etakahkâpewicik iyikohk nîya nihkwâkan."* (laughter) *"Etipeyihtamân nitaskiy aspin ohci kayâs. Anohc ekipahwawikawiyân sakâpihkanihk ekwa nikakipahwawikawin, mâka metoni nitânwehten aniki katakahkwepinikecik wîhkwâkaniyiw ecîhkeyihtamân papâmi nîya kakaskihohikawiwâniwiw katipeyihtamihk."* (laughter) *"Âstamispîhk nicayisiyiniwak niwâpamikwak enipahikawiyân. Mihcet ohci nitaskîhkân kâsonâniwiw sakâhk, tapiskoc nipowipayinâniwiw ohci mistahi sekisiwin. Kikahkîkâsînamawâwak cî kîyawâw ôki kâwiyasiwâtâcik? Nitawâsimisak!—mâskôc kanipahâhkatosocik ekwa ehâtaweyimimiht, ekwa mîna, ekostâcicik kasâkewecik ohci sakâhk kîspin ekîsikâk. Namôya wîcihimâci kihcôkimânâhk mâtayak pipohki, aniki kamisiwanâtisiwak nicayisiyiniwak.*

*"Mâka metoni mistahi emamisîwâtak ana kâhotaniskotâpet, kakostâciyân ohci nipahâhkatosowin kîspin pakitiniyici kasâkôcihât nicayisiyiniwak. Peyak kîsikâw kikahispayin kîspin iyiniwak ohci kîwetinohk kapamihihcik ôki awa kâhotâniskotâpet. Kikâkîsimostamâtinâwâw kîhtwâm,"* he cried, stretching forth his hands, *"kîyawâw, kâhokimâhkâniwiyek kâpimitisahamik môniyâwak owiyasiwewiniwâwa, ekota ohci kakitimâkeyimâyeko ekwa kawîcihâyekok aniki nicayisiyiniwak kâhâtaweyimimiyit!"*

*"Apisîs ekwa piko ayiwâk kahitweyân. Kîtahtawe nâway nikîkisîkisotâw otasahkewa, mâka ekîhitotamân osâm piko ekwayâc kahohtinamân*

*nitipahamâtowina. Ôma kîwetinohk ekîtipeyihtamân, mâka mâskôc namôya nikapimâtisin kawâpahtamân ôma kîhtwâm. Kikakwecimitinâwâw kîyawâw kâwiyasiwâtamek âcimomasinahikanihkehkek kastahk nitayamiwin ekwa pâmihâcimohkek ita mekwânohk ehayâcik môniyâwak. Ôma nitayamiwin, nititwân kakispwewâtisoyân.*

*"Nikiskeyinîwin ekwa emâyâtisiyân mâka ekîkakwêmiyotôtamân. Kitimâkeyimik ôki awâsisak, nicayisiyiniwak kitimâkeyim ôki kehtehayak ekwa kâkîtimâkisicik ôki nicayisiyiniwak! Nititwân ohci peyak nipîkiskwewin miteyaniy; ekwa ayisk Mistahi Maskwa kâkike ehoyotôtemihtawit ohci awa môniyâw nâpew, itisahamaw ekwa kâsînamaw ekwa wîcih!"*

*"Tân'si! Nikîtayamin!"* [36]

The charge was treason-felony and the verdict guilty. Brought before the court to learn his fate, Justice Richardson said (sic):

"Big Bear, have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?"

The old man drew himself up with that imperious air that proclaimed him leader and fitted him so well; the thick nostrils expanded, the broad, deep chest was thrown out, the strong jaw looked aggressively prominent, the mouth was a straight line. He gave his head the little characteristic toss that always preceded his speeches.

"I think I should have *something* to say," he began slowly, "about the occurrences which brought me here in *chains*!" He spoke in his native Cree, knowing no English. He paused. Then with the earnestness, the eloquence and the pathos that

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[36] McIlwraith, Naomi, "*Mistahi Maskwa's* Courtroom Speech Translated into *Nehiyawewin*" (Edmonton, Alberta: School of Native Studies, Native Studies 403, March 2006).

never failed to move an audience, red or white, he went on to speak of the troubles of the spring.

"I knew little of the killing at Frog Lake beyond hearing the shots fired. When any wrong was brewing I did my best to stop it in the beginning. The turbulent ones of the band got beyond my control and shed the blood of those I would have protected. I was away from Frog Lake a part of the winter, hunting and fishing, and the rebellion had commenced before I got back. When white men were few in the country I gave them the hand of brotherhood. I am sorry so few are here who can witness for my friendly acts.

"Can anyone stand out and say that I ordered the death of a priest or an agent? You think I encouraged my people to take part in the trouble. I did not. I advised them against it. I felt sorry when they killed those men at Frog Lake, but the truth is when news of the fight at Duck Lake reached us my band ignored my authority and despised me because I did not side with the half-breeds. I did not so much as take a white man's horse. I always believed that by being the friend of the white man, I and my people would be helped by those of them who had wealth. I always thought it paid to do all the good I could. Now my heart is on the ground.

"I look around me in this room and see it crowded with handsome faces—faces far handsomer than my own" (laughter). "I have ruled my country for a long time. Now I am in chains and will be sent to prison, but I have no doubt the handsome faces I admire about me will be competent to govern the land" (laughter). "At present I am dead to my people. Many of my band are hiding in the woods, paralyzed with terror. Cannot this court send them a pardon? My own children!—perhaps they are

starving and outcast, too, afraid to appear in the light of day. If the government does not come to them with help before the winter sets in, my band will surely perish.

"But I have too much confidence in the Great Grandmother to fear that starvation will be allowed to overtake my people. The time will come when the Indians of the North-West will be of much service to the Great Grandmother. I plead again," he cried, stretching forth his hands, "to you, the chiefs of the white men's laws, for pity and help to the outcasts of my band!

"I have only a few words more to say. Sometimes in the past I have spoken stiffly to the Indian agents, but when I did it was only in order to obtain my rights. The North-West belonged to me, but I perhaps will not live to see it again. I ask the court to publish my speech and to scatter it among the white people. It is my defense.

"I am old and ugly, but I have tried to do good. Pity the children of my tribe! Pity the old and helpless of my people! I speak with a single tongue; and because Big Bear has always been the friend of the white man, send out pardon and give them help!

"How! Aquisanee—I have spoken!" (197-199)[37]

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While Cameron's description of *Mistahi Maskwa* reveals the biographer's skewed racial perceptions, I include them here to illustrate that they are both constative in their verifiability or non-verifiability and performative in their apparent attempt to sway the reader. *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech, itself, contains many speech acts, including constatives throughout that could have been verified by someone other

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[37] Cameron, William Bleasdell, *Blood Red The Sun* (Calgary, Alberta: Kenway Publishing Company, 1950) 197-199.

than he, such as "When any wrong was brewing I did my best to stop it in the beginning," and "When white men were few in the country I gave them the hand of brotherhood." In fact, William Cameron, Catharine Simpson, and William McLean all testify that the young men of *Mistahi Maskwa's* band did rebuke him and that he could not control them. It seems, however, that the jury understands these defence testimonies as weak and unworthy of consideration. *Mistahi Maskwa* laments that he has so few friends left and he articulates a performative of the type that expresses disappointment rather than apology: "I am sorry so few are here who can witness for my friendly acts." A performative speech act, in addition to "doing" something, contains a speaker's intent and a hoped for effect on the listener. Perhaps *Mistahi Maskwa* wants to chastise those white men he helped, who now fail to return his assistance. Remarkably, given all that he and his people have suffered with the near extermination of the plains buffalo, starvation, sickness, and demoralization, *Mistahi Maskwa* can summon a measure of humour, although ruefully, when he says he observes "faces far handsomer than my own" in the courtroom. While such a statement could have been assigned a truth or false value, it clearly stages a performative in both its effort and success in causing its hearers to laugh. *Mistahi Maskwa* pleads on behalf of his people a number of times in his address to the court, uttering performatives with the intent to move his listeners to "do" something for the Plains Cree of his band. He also asks the court to publish his speech so white people can know what he said. Unfortunately, as Dempsey observes, "Big Bear's speech was never widely circulated; in fact many newspapers did not even report his sentence" (192).

What kind of speech act have I performed in translating *Mistahi Maskwa's* court-room speech back to *Nehiyawewin*, especially as a non-fluent translator? My anxieties about writing this thesis partly in *Nehiyawewin* surface yet again, as I compare my own lack of fluency with the difficulties translators such as Peter Hourie and Rev. McKay demonstrated. My fluent friend and colleague, Dorothy Thunder has agreed to verify all my Cree translations, giving me a degree of confidence that I have refrained from what, in English, we call catachresis. More specifically, in *Nehiyawewin: môya enohtewanwehkâtakok kîyawâw kânehiyawiyek, ekwa môya enohtepisomitakok. Nawac ewâtâpweyân ekwa ewâmanâcimitakok.* I do not want to baffle or hurt you, the ones who are Cree. Instead, I want to speak the truth and speak to you with much care. I began this journey when I wanted to understand my father's experience as a fluent speaker and had no idea how humbled and enriched I would become. For these blessings I am truly grateful. *Ekîmâcinehiyaw'kiskinohamâkosiyân osâm ekînohtenisitohtawak nohtâwiy ekwa okiskeyihtamowin ekîpeyakopakaskît. Môya ekîkiskeyihtamân ômisi isi etapahteyimisoyân ekwa epapeweyân. Enanâskomoyân mistahi ohci ôhi saweyihtâkosiwina.*

By including the Cree chief's courtroom speech have I merely cited a large body of written words, words that were, once, spoken? Once that is, in this particular manner, in this particular circumstance, by this particular man—*Mistahi Maskwa*—for his express purpose at that time. J.H. Miller, a friend of Jacques Derrida and a renowned deconstructionist, in citing Austin, says this about citation:

> A citation, it would appear, is denatured, "etiolated," to use another of Austin's figures. It is "mention" and not "use." This means it can never be a felicitous way of doing things with words, whatever it may have been when Austin first "used" it. To cite an utterance is to suspend it,

> as with the clothespins of the quotation marks I have used. Citation turns an utterance, in a manner of speaking, into literature, into fiction. (3)

If Cameron relegates *Mistahi Maskwa* and his eloquence to fiction in citing him, what do I accomplish in re-citing the Cree chief in English and retracing the words back into *Nehiyawewin*? I argue that neither Cameron nor Dufresne fictionalize *Mistahi Maskwa*, and that I aim not to display the Cree chief like laundry on a clothesline; rather, my citation serves to let *Mistahi Maskwa* reiterate his power as an orator. We are coddled by technology in the early twenty-first century, and this does little to cultivate our aural memory. A listener must apply himself or herself vigourously, blocking out all stimuli to attend to a public lecture. To address the jury this way, despite his imminent imprisonment, *Mistahi Maskwa* articulates the immediacy and vitality of the spoken word. I hope that in speaking again, *kanehiyawet kîhtwâm*, in Cree and here in my thesis, *Mistahi Maskwa* reminds us of the richness and candour of communicating face to face where a speaker's facial enunciations and body locutions impart even more power to the uttered words. Reiterating my own intent might help: my father spoke Cree and I want to understand his experience as a fluent speaker; I listen for whispers of maternal ancestors who spoke Cree; would that I could hear an orator such as *Mistahi Maskwa*; imagination is the stuff of which history and literature are composed and I imagine a day when I might understand a pulsing stream of Cree utterances. I argue that in citing *Mistahi Maskwa* in this way, I perform the same kind of speech act he uttered in warning Mrs. Simpson of his young men's anger early that morning on the second of April 1885. I warn of the unspeakable losses we incur in losing tribal tongues and I urge my readers to take some care in considering other ways of understanding reality, beyond English and

other dominant languages. I will warn you of another thing though: those still waters under your canoe will never again be so calm.

That *Mistahi Maskwa* spoke in Cree, that his words were later written only in English, and that I have chosen to cite him so extensively via Cameron and translate the text back to *Nehiyawewin*, resonates with a notorious dispute between the famous deconstructionist Jacques Derrida and the philosopher John Searle in the late 1970s, whose textual altercation involves contesting claims about the differences between speech and writing. Given the urgency of preserving *Nehiyawewin* and other Indigenous languages, as *spoken* languages, Derrida's and Searle's skirmish is especially salient because of their contentions about what we do when we speak and write.

In addition to identifying long-ignored differences between constative utterances with truth values and performative utterances that while lacking verifiability actually "do" something, Austin's earlier treatise on speech act theory declared:

> a performative utterance will, for example, be in a *peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy…Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly— used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of *etiolations* of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. (22)

Fifteen years later when Searle and Derrida engaged in "verbal violence" (Derrida, *Limited Inc abc* 112), more well-adjusted interlocutors perhaps perceived Austin to have playfully instigated this street fight by ringing the doorbell, running away, and leaving the other neighbourhood brats behind to answer for this act—one that involved not speech per se, but mischief. For Austin died, young, before his papers

and *How To Do Things With Words* were published. In fact, he prohibited their publication while he was alive.

While Derrida and Searle clashed on several points, the issue most relevant to preserving the Cree language in general and to my inclusion of *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech in my contemplations on *Nehiyawewin* more specifically involves what Austin might mean by parasitism, what Derrida means by iterability, and what Searle means by citation. Derrida complains that "it is as just such a "parasite" that writing has always been treated by the philosophical tradition,..." ("Signature Event Context" or *Sec* 190), and speculates on citation:

> ultimately, isn't it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, "non-serious," *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a "successful" performative? (191)

Searle, in "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," criticizes the French deconstructionist for misunderstanding Austin's position on discourse in fiction, on stage, or in a poem in his theory of speech acts, and reads Austin in this way:

> Austin's idea is simply this: if we want to know what it is to make a promise or make a statement we had better not *start* our investigations with promises made by actors on stage in the course of a play or statements made in a novel by novelists about characters in a novel, because in a fairly obvious way such utterances are not standard cases of promises and statements. (204)

Searle objects to Derrida's apparent interpretation of Austin meaning "something bad or anomalous or not "ethical" about such discourse" ("Reply" 205).

Because I can only access *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech act through the text and deliberate on it by citing it, it is critical that I clearly distinguish "parasitic discourse" from "citationality." Searle contends that the two are not synonymous because while to cite is to only "mention" expressions, parasitic discourse actually involves the

"use" of the spoken or written words. Novelists and poets in writing and actors when communicating on stage do not quote anyone, Searle asserts; they actually use the words. Responding to Derrida's postulation on the "determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability" Searle argues that parasitic discourse—speech acts in literature, poetry, or theatre—is the "determined modification of the rules for performing speech acts" and, even though it may be an "instance" of iterability, is not at all a "modification of iterability or citationality" ("Reply" 206). Language cannot exist without iterability, Searle maintains, and furthermore, "Every utterance in a natural language, parasitic or not, is an instance of iterability,..." (206). In *Speech Acts: An Essay In The Philosophy Of Language* Searle demonstrates iterability by stating his thesis: "speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior" (12), and by reiterating it a number of times until he writes it this way: "speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of intentional behavior" (53). Charging at Derrida again, Searle accuses him of "confusing no less than three separate and distinct phenomena: iterability, citationality, and parasitism" ("Reply" 206).

Derrida's vitriolic defense in *Limited Inc abc,* to Searle's eleven page denunciation, covers no less than ninety-two pages, a seemingly intemperate reaction that includes ridiculing Searle by re-naming him and thereafter both referring to and addressing him as Sarl—an abbreviation of "Société à responsabilité limitée—literally Society with Limited Responsibility"(170). Derrida retorts:

> there is still no confusion even in *Sec* of citation (in the sense considered strict by Sarl: that which is indicated by quotation-marks) with that other effect of iterability, the "parasite" excluded by Austin. Nor was citationality ever confused with iterability in general, but simply traced back to it.... (242)

Derrida advises Searle to re-read "Signature Event Context," look for the signifier "or" recorded each time Derrida writes the two words citationality and iterability (citation "or" iterability) (242), and recognize that rather than "equivalence, dissociation," or "opposition" the "or" denotes a different association. In *Sec* Derrida explicates iterability by impressing upon his reader that a "written communication" must remain legible even when the person to whom it was intended is no longer alive:

> It must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees. This iterability (*iter*, once again, comes from *itara, other* in Sanskrit, and everything that follows may be read as the exploitation of the logic which links repetition to alterity), structures the mark of writing itself, and does so moreover for no matter what type of writing.... (315)

In *Limited Inc abc* Derrida repeats this argument when he says that "iterability alters" (200). In his own show of iterability he reiterates this position by tying iterability not only to alterity and the "other," but also to writing: "the graphics of iterability inscribes alteration irreducibly in repetition" and "such iterability...structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved" (200). I wonder if Derrida and Searle ever met each other and deliberated face-to-face.

## *Aniki Nîso Nâpewak Kâmasinahikecik* – Two Men Writing

*Ekîkiskeyihtamek cî*
*kanehiyawinisitohtamek*
*môya katisk kanehiyawasinahikeyek?*

*Nitohtamok.*
*Kakwenisitohtamok.*

Did you know,
to understand Cree
is not merely to write in Cree?

Listen.
Try to understand.

To what degree, beyond citation, is my retracing *Mistahi Maskwa's* speech back into Cree, iterable? What of the writing of a natural language like *Nehiyawewin* if it dies an unnatural death, due to the forces of colonization and cultural genocide? What if, as opposed to French—the language Derrida wrote in—and English—the language Austin, Searle, and now I write in—the writing of a language constituted its theft, as a Cree student argued a number of years ago in a university-level Cree class: "When you write the language, you steal it. The Cree language is meant to be spoken, to be used daily" (March 2001). And what if, after the instructor has repeated—verbalized—a certain Cree word many times, another student laments, "I can't say it because I can't see it," and asks the *Nehiyaw'okiskinohamâkew* to write the word on the board?

Such are the urgency and irony characteristic of the effort to avert linquicide. I must respectfully disagree with my classmate with one caveat: writing a threatened language does not denote its appropriation, provided the purpose for writing it is to repeat it, like a heartbeat, for the benefit of its preservation. There are many threats to Indigenous languages, most obviously the predominance of colonial tongues in schools and other institutions, the marketplace, the media, and now, sadly, the home. If, however, an Indigenous language speaker feels so threatened by the writing of his language that the sincere commitment of a non-Indigenous person to the vital debate on traditional discourse seems yet another insincere speech act by someone of the dominant society, this thinking might pose the greatest risk of all: excluding all speakers who are not fluent certainly excludes Indigenous people who have had their language taken from them and is one way of ensuring that language will stagnate, that

tradition will remain unchanged, that culture will be prohibited from conversing with modern society and contributing essential human knowledge to the world-weary amongst us who are unilingual and poorer for it. This is *not* to say that only with the involvement of non-Indigenous people can a language survive or that leaving its protection only in the mouths of fluent speakers points to its certain death. Advocating the writing of a threatened language in addition to the speaking of it, by Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people, *is* to say that Indigenous people can have solidarity with non-Indigenous people, that culture is not a caged creature, that rather than opting for the safety of a tiny and not-quite-but-nearly deserted island on the *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* somewhere between *Amiskwacîwâskahikanihk êkwa Misâskwatôminiskâhk*, let us launch our canoes and share who we are, test our tongues and create new words for new phenomena, and recognize sincere expressions of concern by those who appear or sound different.

Having listened to *Mistahi Maskwa's* great-great granddaughter speak at the University of Alberta in April 2004, I was moved to write this poem for her. I had read Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and a number of articles on *Mistahi Maskwa*, and immediately following Ms. Johnson's visit I purchased and read her and Rudy Wiebe's book *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman*. My experience reading about *Mistahi Maskwa*, hearing Yvonne Johnson speak, and reading about her life led me to write "*Ohci Maskihkîy Maskwa Iskwew*." Before I even knew what iterability meant, I believe my repeating both her words and *Mistahi Maskwa's* words anticipated this very chapter on speech acts in this very thesis. "Poetry is not something that occurs naturally in Anglo-Saxon countries," says poet and professor

emeritus E.D. Blodgett.[38] Certainly, some might laugh because of an amazing history of English poetry that includes such greats as Shakespeare, Keats, Yeats, Dickinson, Heaney, and many, many others, but it is true that throughout the late twentieth century a certain widespread apathy toward poetry presented itself as a hindrance to thoughtful perception and expression. As recently as 1997, Tom Wayman was moved to write the article "Why Profess What is Abhorred: The Rescue of Poetry." He considers poetry's status as a "thoroughly marginalized art form" (166):

> Given that time is at a premium in our educational process, why is poetry a fit subject when the art's current marginal status is attested to by various measurable standards? For instance, small press publishers have complained to me that whereas 30 years ago a new collection of poems by a Canadian author routinely sold a pitiful 1,200 copies, a similar book these days is lucky to sell 500. (170)

In the first decade of the 21st century we have witnessed what some might call a renaissance in poetry with new poetry organizations, festivals, and performances on the rise. When a society or government, however, deems a poet laureate as a mere luxury rather than a necessity, what form of stability does this lend the art form? Wayman argues that the basis of recent interest in certain types of poetry is "spectacle—consumption of a public performance" (171). Similarly, Indigenous language classes do not enjoy a firm future; first year university language classes are generally full but beyond that the numbers dwindle, largely because of a lack of appropriately challenging textbooks and qualifed instructors. I maintain that for precisely these reasons, the dubious freedoms of speech we supposedly enjoy in English-speaking nations seem to perch dangerously close to the precarious precipices on which both poetry and Indigenous languages teeter.

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[38] Blodgett, E.D. Edmonton Poetry Festival "Coffee Lines," City Hall, (Edmonton, Alberta: Friday, 22 September 2006.)

***Ohci Maskihkîy Maskwa Iskwew*** (14 *ayîkipîsim* 2004)

For Medicine Bear Woman (14 April 2004)

You spoke to me that day.
You thanked me and the others for listening.
That day, I first heard your words as you spoke them.
Speak, my friend, speak. Your words are your medicine.
*Kikîpîkiskwâsin anima kîsikâw.*
*Kikînanâskominân osâm ekînitohtâtâhk.*
*Anima kîsikâw, nistam nikîpehten kipîkiskwewina anihi pîkiskwewina kâkîhitweyan.*
*Pîkiskwe nitôtem pîkiskwe. Enanâtawihoyan ohci kititwewina.*

Someone asked you what you have learned about justice.
You said, "There is no justice.
There's just us and all the rest."
*Awîyak kikîkakwecimik kîkway ekiskinohamâkosiyan ohci kwayaskwasowewin.*
*Kikîhitwân "Namôya kîkway kwayaskwasowewin.*
*Mâka piko kîyânaw ekwa kahkiyaw awîyak kotakak."*

Tell me, I want to understand you.
I want to know about the just ones.
Like that judge who gave you the power of speech.
*Wîhtamawin enohtenisitohtamân.*
*Ninohtenistaweyimâwak aniki kâkwayaskwâtisicik.*
*Tâpiskôc ana owiyasiwew kâmiyisk sôhkihtâkosiwin.*

I saw you on the outside.
I listened to you on the outside.
You talked to me on the outside.
You said, "I'm not a bad person inside.
The Creator doesn't make junk."
*Kikîwâpamitin kinânakacihitin,*
*Kikînitohtâtin ehisinânakacihitân.*
*Kikîpîkiskwâsin ehisinânakacihitân.*
*Kikîhitwân "Namôya emacâyiwiyân.*
*Kiseman'tow namôya osihtâw macikonâs."*

Someone asked you what you do with your anger now.
You said you make statements whenever you can.
When you spoke of what you made in art class,
I wondered who did bad things to you.
I wondered if that's why you did that bad thing.
*Awîyak kikîkakwecimik tân'si kititohten kîspin kâkisiwâsiyan.*

*Kikîhitwân êhayâsîhtaman kîspin kâkasihtâyan.*
*Kâkîpîkiskweyan ohci kîkwây kâkîhosîhtâyan kitaspasinahikewin ohci papiskihc ayâwinihk.*
*Nikîmâmitoneyihten awîna ekîmâyitôtâsk.*
*Nikîmâmitoneyihten kîspin ewako ôma ekîmâyitôtamân.*

I asked you how speech and words give you power.
You said, "Words and speech is power but they're not power
if there ain't no one listening."
I wondered if you felt the power of all of us listening to you.
*Ekîkakwecimitân tân'sîyisi maskawisîwin ehisimiyikiwiyan ôhi kipîkiskwewina ekwa kihitwewina.*
*Kikîhitwân "Pîkiskwewina ekwa itwewina emaskawisîmakâki mâka namôya emaskawisîmakâki kîspin namâwiyak enitohtâtâhk."*
*Nikîmamitoneyihten kîspin ewîcihikowisiyan osâm kahkiyaw nîyanân enitohtâtâhk.*

Now, I read your words as you wrote them.
Your great-great grandfather, *Mistahi Maskwa*, said, "Words are power."[39]
You say, "If no one ever speaks the words that should be spoken,
the silence destroys you."[40]
*Anohc nitayamihtân kipîkiskwewina anihi pîkiskwewina kâkîmasinahaman*
*Kimosôm kitâniskotâpân, Mistahi Maskwa, kîhitwew, "Itwewina ohci emaskawâtisihk."*
*Kihitwân, "Kîspin namâwiyak epîkiskweht itwewina anihi itwewina, kakîpîkiskwecik anima kâmwâtisiwin emisiwanâcihikoyan."*

I listen to you on the outside.
Can you hear me listening?
*Kinitohtâtin kinâ.*
*Kikahkîpehtawin cî enanahihtâtân?*

Speak, my friend. Your truth is your power.
I want to hear your power.
*Pîkiskwe nitôtem. Kitâpwewin anima kiwîcihikowisiwin.*
*Enohtepehtamân kiwîcihikowisiwin.*

Speak, Medicine Bear Woman.
*Pîkiskwe Maskihkî Maskwa Iskwew.*

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[39] Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, *Stolen Life: The Journey Of A Cree Woman* (Toronto: Jackpine House Ltd., 1998) 329.

[40] Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, *Stolen Life: The Journey Of A Cree Woman* (Toronto: Jackpine House Ltd., 1998) 329.

I sense an oscillation, perhaps an energy, as though the rapids on *Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy* at Cumberland House—*Wâskahikanihk*—have grown larger, from a two foot ledge to a twelve foot drop. Even though *Mistahi Maskwa* and all his listeners are long gone, may their spirits dance brightly in the northern sky with my father's; Dad has not been gone a long time now, but I imagine him in conversation with Dr. Harold Cardinal, *Mistahi Maskwa*, and others. I am listening and as I close my eyes to block out all other distractions I feel the pulse of *Nehiyawewin itwewina*, as I repeat the sounds in my head. I will forever be a better listener for having had this experience of studying Cree, whether or not I become as fluent as my father was. Perhaps "*Kâh-kîhtwâm*" says it better.

## *Kâh-kîhtwâm*[41] – Again and Again

"*Kinisitohten cî*?" Dad asked,
and I didn't, *môya*,
because I hadn't listened enough,
hadn't heard the words
quite often enough,
did not, could not, repeat
what I hadn't heard.

*Môya ekîtâpoweyân osâm*
*môya epâpehtawak osâm*
*môya enânitohtawak.*

But even as I thought I didn't understand
because I hadn't listened,
suddenly I could hear
that to understand Cree
is to listen to Cree,
repeatedly.

*Kanehiyaw 'nisitohtamân*
*kakînânehiyaw 'nitohtamân*
*kâh-kîhtwâm.*

More often than the sun
lowers or lifts,
the moon slumbers or stirs.
Oftener even than I heft a pen
to wrench words
from the recesses of thought.

Suddenly I could hear it.
Can you hear it now,
as I repeat it? To understand
Cree is to listen to Cree,
repeatedly.

*Kanehiyaw 'nisitohtamek*
*kakînânehiyaw 'nitohtamek*
*kâh-kîhtwâm.*

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[41] "Reduplicative Prefix Marker: Reduplication is a method that is used with verbs or pre-verbs to replace the particles always and forever and emphasize continuous action." Hunter, Emily and Betty Karpinski, *Plains Cree Grammar Guide and Glossary*, (Edmonton: School of Native Studies, University of Alberta, 2001) 89.

As the hands of the day
rotate round the sun,
as the North Star submits
to the Morning Star,
when geese depart in August
and return in goose month—
*niskipîsim*—as March slips
into April and *ayîkipîsim*
echoes with the exuberant exclamations
of *ayîkisak* for their mates,
*aniki ayîkisak kânikamocik*
*kânânikamocik,*
to understand Cree is to listen
to Cree, again and again.

*Kanehiyaw'nisitohtamek*
*kakînânehiyaw'nitohtamek*
*kâh-kîhtwâm.*

As our hearts beat
over and over,
*epâhpahokoyahk kâh-kîhtwâm.*
As we take in
the clean air of life,
*eyâyehyeyahk kâh-kîhtwâm.*
The way water washes
thirst from our lips,
*emâminihkweyahk nipiy kâh-kîhtwâm.*
Just as the North Saskatchewan River
courses continually
through the carotid of the prairies,
*epâpimiciwahki Kisiskâciwani Sîpiy kâh-kîhtwâm.*

How a mother bear protects her young,
*ekosi emâmanâcihât otoskawâsisa*
*aniki tâpiskôc maskosisak*
*kâmâmecawesiyit kâh-kîhtwâm.*

When a freckle on a cheek,
a certain curve of jaw,
a way of smiling, or a long
strong bone returns to the next
generation or the next one
after that, especially when
the great-grandchildren play
those same games, say those same words,

sing those same songs,
to understand Cree is to listen to Cree
again and again and again.

*Wâh pâpekîwecik*
*câhcahkewin aniwâhk,*
*tâpiskan ôma kâwâwâkamok*
*e-isi epâhpâhpisit, ahpô ekâkinwâk*
*ekwa esâsôhkahk ôma oskan*
*wâh pâpesonâkosit ohci wîtisânîhitowin*
*âniskotâpân ahpô âniskotâpân*
*ewako ani*
*wâwîs cî wâh*
*emâmêcawesiyit âniskotâpânak,*
*ewako anihi mecawewina, wâh epâpîkiskweyit*
*ewako anihi itwewina,*
*wâh enânikamoyit ewako anihi nikamowina,*
*kanehiyaw'nisitohtahkik*
*kakînânehiyaw'nitohtahkik*
*kâh-kîhtwâm.*

## *nipeyâhtakowân osâm enohtemanâcimitakok*
## Conclusion: Lexicon of Respect

### Critical Race Theory at Canadian Tire

Three days after submitting Chapter Four
I'm still unable to be angry
in Cree. So let me
be angry in English.

Mom, having never before told me
she has bad days, let alone rough weeks,
has had a rough week. She tells me
two stories. Two things happened to her
but she wanted to wait
until I'd finished Chapter Four
before telling me.

I think I've had it rough,
accused of appropriation,
misrepresentation,
for writing in Cree
while wearing white,
skin that is.

Mom's first story, involving
toilet paper, has the potential
for great humour. This first story,
however, is far from funny.

While shopping at Canadian Tire
Mom spies a brand of toilet paper
she likes in someone's buggy.
"Where did you find that toilet paper?"
she asks the woman with the buggy.
"What!" snaps the woman.
"What aisle did you find
that toilet paper in?"
Mom asks again.

"*You're* an Indian,
and *I* don't help Indians!"
sneers the woman from another country,
let's just say a warm country.

The woman probably thinks my mother,
who neither has nor wants
treaty entitlements,
is a freeloader.

The second story is still
too hard to tell.

Judith Butler, in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, harkens back to Derrida in arguing that an act, especially a speech act, does not occur in a moment and then dissipate; acts intersect, rather, connecting a chain of "temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions" (14). To paraphrase Butler, the woman at Canadian Tire re-cited the errors of history for my mother's harm. Butler elaborates:

> The possibility for a speech act to resignify a prior context, depends, in part, upon the gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effect it produces. For the threat, for instance, to have a future it never intended, for it to be returned to its speaker in a different form, and defused through that return, the meanings the speech act acquires and the effect it performs must exceed those by which it was intended, and the contexts it assumes must not be quite the same as the ones in which it originates (if such an origin can be found). (14-15)

Butler points to the stealth of hate speech in suggesting the difficulties of locating the beginnings of the intended harm in the speech act. She also implicates the recitation of racist speech in dredging up – resignifying – previous conditions for the enactment of the speech act and for re-enacting the damage. Butler identifies a gap between the intention by which the speech act is uttered and the actual harm it causes. A speech act can produce an effect it never aspires to because the speech act contains meanings and effects that may be bigger than what the speaker intends, possibly even beyond the speaker's purview. This does not condone or mitigate the woman's insult to my mother, for in performing a truly sad historical travesty, the woman lacked both accuracy and creativity in labelling my mother this way; the woman from the warm country relied solely on a colonial narrative and an imperial nomenclature to utter her words and categorize Mom. Butler suggests "counter-speech" as a way to "talk

back" (15). In response to the woman's speech attack Mom retaliated with a verbal defence, articulating her own power. I find no need to racialize the woman who subjected my mother to this linguistic insult. You will notice also, that my writing this poem and Mom giving me permission to include it here in my conclusion is our way of talking back. Understand, however, the absurd intimacy of racist speech and our need for privacy as the reasons for not telling the second story, a speech act uttered neither by a stranger nor a foreigner.

That the woman at Canadian Tire spoke in English with the rich lilt of a newcomer signifies the irony she contributes to the diversity of our so-very-anglophone province. Perhaps having no awareness of the accident and advantage of originating in a community with millions of speakers of her mother tongue, the woman arrived at a host of erroneous conclusions about Mom and failed to account for the Aboriginal mother tongues that assign names to this sometimes very cold land, of which *nehiyânâhk ekwa paskwâwiyinînâhk* are but two.

I hear a counter-point, however, to this woman's abusive bilingualism for I fervently believe that bi- and multilingualism articulate the keenest of hope for humanity. On our quest for the munificence in each of us, the human mind's acuity in managing not one but two or more languages speaks of our deep capacity for cross-cultural understanding.

Oxford defines a coincidence as a "remarkable occurrence of events or circumstances without apparent causal connection" (Pearsall and Trumble 282). This does not, however, describe the simultaneity of my cross-cultural experiences with *Nehiyawewin,* my observing the ambitious and capable Aboriginal professionals in all

walks of life and the two people without homes – they are people first, before they are homeless – I saw at the University of Alberta LRT station the other day, both of them Aboriginal. Studying *Nehiyawewin – enehiyaw'kiskinohamâkosiyân* – over nearly six years has granted me a horizon-stretching, mind-bending education of both humbling and magnificent proportions. Parking my decrepit vehicle four years ago to finance this effort and becoming a regular of the inner city as I navigate the fits and starts of the Edmonton Transit System, I still look at people lacking shelter with anger and frustration, but now with tempered judgment. I am not angry with them; instead I am disturbed by our colonial history and the inertial infrastructures that perpetuate poverty defined by the hoarded privilege of the elite. There are more people without refuge in Edmonton than there were when I began studying *Nehiyawewin*: I see more people without homes more frequently and I am tired of it because I do not possess the power to do anything about it. Not all people without homes are Cree or Aboriginal, but many are. Nor are all Cree and Aboriginal people homeless, and my Aboriginal colleagues object to the stereotype of the drunken Indian on the streets because the image does not describe them and the many healthy, accomplished Native people achieving great things in this country. Unfortunately, however, our national chronicle has somehow implanted the illusion of Eurocolonial or foreign superiority and Indigenous inferiority in the minds of many, newcomers or not. Moreover, the phenomenon of displaced Indigenous people in Canada – their homeland – is no deception, but reality.

Displacement is an all-too-common tale in world history, and despite its horrors it also accounts for the meeting and mixing of diverse cultures and language

contact. I still wonder how I have only *recently* learned some of the history of Cree people and Cree culture. Again, it is no coincidence that a domineering tongue should dispossess the language and history of the dominated. Many scholars, including Nettle and Romaine, Mithun, Campbell, and, in Canada, Kinkade, Norris and Jantzen, Castell and Westfall, and others are documenting the worldwide occurrence of language loss in the context of economic globalization. With mass migrations and the intermingling of peoples, the concept of "home" might seem an increasingly fragile idea. Norris and Jantzen present a cogent argument for the transmission and preservation of Indigenous languages in Canada as home languages. Intergenerational communication is essential to keeping language alive, rescuing culture, and maintaining our human connection to each other and to human knowledge. I revel in the apparent synchronicity of learning *Nehiyawewin* and returning home, humoured by knowing that yet again this is no happenstance.

## *Nikîpetâpoyin* – I Came This Way by Canoe[42]

*kayâsâyiwan anima meskanasihk ekîpisohamân, kâkîhâpacihtâcik aniskâc niwahkomâkanak*
I stumbled upon that ancient trail, foot-fallen by my ancestors,
overgrown with green, bramble, centuries of former lives.

That green, wet place where my grandmother's
mothers lived, breathed, died:
Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba.

June, 1989:
*nikîpetâpoyin*,
There, on another river:
*ekota kotak sîpîhk*,
*wînipekohk sîpîhk*.

We pulled our canoes up on shore,
stood there sweating, swearing
at the buzzing in our ears, peering
through the peepholes of our mosquito netting.

Comrades paddled those canoes with me,
sharing food, bugs, sunshine, rain;
travelled with me as I explored
former lives.
Others, a convoy of my ancestors,
in my paddle,
in my pack,
in my experience,
*wraiths* insisting on a presence.
Shoulders, backs, abdominals, we *are*
our muscles. We *move* those canoes.
We *are*
*perpetual*
*motion*.

*nitihtimaninâna, nispiskwaninâna, nitaskatayinâna,*
*emaskawisiwiyiniwiyâhk*.
*nitâhkami mâmiyopimâtisinân*.

*ekota ekînîpawiyân*.
There I stood: worn like our trail, weary
like the grip on my paddle, smeared

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[42] I wrote an earlier version of this poem, titled "Former Lives," for English 314, Augustana University College, Camrose: 1998.

with mud, sweating like the river, straining
to hear the whispers of my foremothers,
searching for the footprints of my forefathers.

Eavesdropping on my ancestors,
now I hear foot-falls that echo through time.
*ekîmihtawakik aniskâc niwahkomâkanak.*
*anohc epehtamân yâwewa, mâka etepihtawakik, cîstâwewak ekwa mîna emiyotâkosicik.*

My grandmother knows that insect-infested place,
Lac du Bonnet. Her uncle drowned there,
her mother was born there,
and her grandmother before that.

Here I stand: looking, leaning back.
I breathe,
live,
want to know who we are,
search for who they were.

*enîpawiyân ôta: ehâpasâpahtamân, ehâsôsimoyân.*
*niyehyân,*
*nipimâtisin,*
*enohtekiskeyimisoyân,*
*enanâtawâpamakik: awînipanak wiyawâw.*

As a poem, *Nikîpetâpoyin* had a former life; I wrote it eight or nine years ago, titled it "Former Lives," and remained unsatisfied in thinking it never quite finished. Now that I have some facility in *Nehiyawewin*, the poem expresses a deeper layer of meaning in my quest for both self and familial understanding. Wanting to contemplate the interaction between speech and writing, I both see and hear *Nikîpetâpoyin* as an example of this relationship. Spoken words may seem as ephemeral as the fog our breath creates on a cold winter morning, while written words assume the solidity of ice on a frozen lake. Robert Bringhurst compares the written form of language to a precipitate much like hailstones (9-10). Had I not written "Former Lives" several years ago my words would likely have vaporized upon leaving my mouth. And yet, many spoken words are as callous as concrete, cruel as a cudgel in their utterance, as those of the woman at Canadian Tire enunciate, or as David Ahenakew's infamous speech act on 13 December 2002 in Saskatchewan conveys. Ahenakew is a Cree leader and recipient of the Order of Canada in 1979 for service to Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, he harbours unspeakable hatred for Jews and said this much and more, reiterating his disdain for the reporter who asked him to elucidate. Sadly, Ahenakew's words and many like them have been bestowed with the permanency of writing because they were so inflammatory rather than melting away they appeared in papers across the country and were re-iterated for weeks, forging the steel edge of hatred.

As Judith Butler reminds us, Austin's illocutionary act is "one in which in saying something, one is at the same time doing something" (17). Unlike perlocutionary acts where even though saying something produces consequences,

where the saying is not tantamount to the doing because the consequences follow the utterance rather than occur simultaneously with the utterance, illocutionary speech acts have the character of producing "effects without any lapse of time, … the saying is itself the doing, and … they are one another simultaneously" (17).

Unlike the woman at Canadian Tire, Ahenakew's words were far more destructive in their incendiary intent. Nonetheless, like the woman at Canadian Tire, Ahenakew lacked imagination, re-iterated a heinous history, deferred to a spurious authority, and, as Butler contends, repeated an all-too-familiar malediction: "As an invocation, hate speech is an act that recalls prior acts, requiring a future repetition to endure" (20).

By re-writing *Nikîpetâpoyin*, I inadvertently subscribe to Derrida's iterability by altering in my re-inscribing. One advantage of writing, revision allows me to refine, always seeking further clarity before submission. The spoken word, on the other hand, cannot be retrieved once presented, though it can be explicated provided the speaker offers this or the hearer asks for an explanation. Ironically, as both Ahenakew and the woman at Canadian Tire demonstrate, iterability is possible in speech and can undermine its ephemeral nature. And while I can withdraw text before submitting or publishing it, once in the public domain these words, too, are "unrefinable," in the sense that I can now not revise them. The twisted irony of all this is that hate speech, the unwritten assault, does not fade with fog as the sun rises to warm the day. Racist rhetoric recycles itself through the ages just as the intergenerational harm of residential schools manifests itself on our inner city streets.

In defiance of this ad nauseam parrotry I offer the poem "Spinning" as my own antithetical impulse to the tiresome redundancy of intolerant forms of expression. Having also written this poem at about the same time I wrote "Former Lives," now known as "*Nikîpetâpoyin*," I choose at this time not to rewrite "Spinning" and not to infuse it with *Nehiyawewin* because my grandmother never spoke Cree to me. Residential schools do not account for language loss in our family as none of my relations attended them; other colonial processes separated the Cree and Ojibwe-speaking grandparents from their grandchildren in my maternal lineage. This is what I find so soft-spokenly poignant about our family history, and my father's sage and unassuming shaping of who we are. Sheer necessity motivates my hope that cultures can survive language loss, because so many Indigenous tongues have yielded to forces beyond their control. As I think about how to construct these sentences in English, I hear both my grandmother's and my father's voices and I know that we have survived. May I one day know the sight of *mînisihkes* on the prairie, understand a fluid tributary of *Nehiyawewin*, and connect the unspun wool onto the spun wool of the spinning wheel I inherited from my grandmother.

**Spinning**[43]

My grandmother's hands, veined with the labour
of children, milking cows, kneading
bread, and pulling Seneca root
nimbly finger the wool.
She has warmed nine younger siblings
with her knitting. Now, she and three
sisters are the last to remember.
She twists the un-spun wool onto the spinning wool.

My hands, chaffed with the work of canoes, children,
and changing the oil, eagerly card the wool.
*The secret*, she says, *is in the carding.*
*If you're a good carder, then the wool*
*will wear much better.*

I card the wool. Flecks of dust and hay and dung
hang on. Like her five babies, four of them dead,
like the memories that won't let go.
She feeds the spinning wheel
while I card the wool.

The travails of the Depression, dusty poverty,
and caring for many children,
not all of them her own, have shaped
her slippered, arthritic foot, which now
deftly pumps the pedal. At the age
of thirteen she went away to work. More
bread, more laundry, and more cows,
she helped to make the ends meet back home.
*Don't hold too much*, she explains, fingering the wool,
*it goes on better a little at a time.*

*You try*, she tells me and my clumsy, sweaty hands
palm the wool. It goes on in clumps.
*Don't hold the wool too tight,*
*this part will join that part*
*if you feed it through your thumb and fingers like this.*

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[43] This poem was first published in the Augustana Student Arts Publication, *HUH?!*, Camrose: Spring 1998.

Her brother Bud built her first spinning wheel
from a bicycle wheel. He brought it home
for her when she was twenty-two.
Grandma's brown fingers were in demand
when she worked that wheel. Her wool
was known in the district and people paid
for well-spun wool.

My fingers curl under in an inherited gesture.
Grandma's hands guide my pale hands; we
make the ends meet. The ball of wool grows larger.
The un-spun wool meets the spun wool.

When I first declared my thesis project three years ago, I had not yet identified the muzzling writer's block I had recently slipped into. Upon learning the wisdom so eloquently articulated in oral cultures, I struggled with writing a thesis about *Nehiyawewin*, my father's ability to speak it, our family history, and whether or not with my pale skin I was justified in writing partly in Cree. In the previous decade I had experienced a dramatic improvement in literacy with an intense study of English literature, acquiring my undergraduate degree in English, and entering graduate studies. These challenges surfaced at just the time my father received a diagnosis for a terminal illness, after two years of medical tests. I did the only right thing and put aside my studies to live with my parents and assist in the trials to come. Not once did I stop thinking about my obligation to finish this thesis, though I admit the collateral uncertainties that come with quitting work have intensified the effort.

This undertaking includes attending more closely to the spoken word. Hearing is not my forte, though studying *Nehiyawewin* and listening to poetry have both harmonized this foible. Just as I was learning the power of speech I contemplated the purported authority of literacy over orality, and the occasion of these deliberations could not have come at a better and worse time. I seriously questioned higher learning and its contributions to envisioning a more just society, particularly when I wondered if the supremacy of writing had somehow contributed to the censoring of Indigenous languages. Language and identity politics entered this troubling mix of reflections. Gregory Scofield's incisive remark at the Celebration of Aboriginal Literature at the Stanley Milner Library in December 2005 helped me understand that only I could give myself permission to proceed with this project. Only very recently have I

discovered that my thesis was supposed to take this long to write and to "trust the process" as I heard someone advise long ago; otherwise "Two Men Talking," "Critical Race Theory at Canadian Tire," and so much of what I consider here would not have found their way into my writing. Writing is *not* an advancement over speaking, though the significance of the written word contributes greatly to the reciprocal human concerns of people across the globe.

A certain text, titled "Teaching Cree Language and Cree Culture to Whites," has helped me understand one Cree woman's regard for her language and culture. Published in 1993 by the University of Manitoba Press and the Publications of the Algonquian Text Society, *The Cree Language is Our Identity: The La Ronge Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf* affords me an opportunity to read in three ways – Cree syllabics (*cahkipehikanak*), Standard Roman Orthography, and English – what she had to say in the early 1990s. Mrs. Whitecalf was 73 years old and spoke only *Nehiyawewin* because she spent her entire life in the bush. In this particular lecture she responds to a young woman who asks what Mrs. Whitecalf thinks about white people wanting to learn the Cree language. Mrs. Whitecalf refers to H. C. Wolfart in her response, a non-Native linguist who has contributed immensely to Cree language studies in Canada:

> *ekosi isi, tâpiskôc awa ôte kiwîcewâkaninaw, îh, mitoni kimiyo-âpachihânaw, kwayask e-wîtapimâyahk, ewako ana e-tâpwewakeyihtahk tâpwe nehiyaw-kîkwây, mitoni e-nôhte-sôhkepitahk, e-nôhte-kiskeyihtahk tânisi e-ispayiniyik ôma kinehiyâwiwininaw.*
>
> just as is the case, for example, with our partner over there [H.C. Wolfart], look, he is very useful to us, we work well with him, that one truly has a positive view of the Cree way, he very much wants to promote our Cree culture and wants to understand how it works. (52-53).

Mrs. Whitecalf speaks not in abstractions but provides an immediate, live example of the good relations – *miyowîcehtowinak* – possible between *Nehiyawak ekwa Moniyâwak*. She continues by encouraging other white people to respect her Cree ways. She freely encourages teaching white people about *Nehiyawewin ekwa Nehiyawisîhcikewin* with the exception of one cultural practice, the Sundance-Lodge, what the Cree call *nipâkwesimowin*. As she admonishes young Cree people not to share what they have learned about *nipâkwesimowin* with white people because this ceremony was given to the Cree, she also affirms those non-Natives, such as priests who use sweetgrass – *wîhkaskwa* – and who support Cree ceremonies.

Mrs. Whitecalf articulates remarkable tolerance for collaboration with non-Natives, given the prohibition of Aboriginal spirituality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and invites white people to practice all but the Sundance-Lodge with them. Katherine Pettipas writes that the *Indian Act* introduced Section 114 in 1895, so that "the repression of ceremonial life became an integral part of the implementation of Indian policy in the prairie region" (107). Because of the resistance of Aboriginal groups on the prairies, however, enforcement proved difficult and was "left to the discretion of the Indian agent and was largely dependent on his abilities to influence his charges" (109). While the *Indian Act* did not specifically prohibit Sun Dances, if piercings or giveaways were involved the Department of Indian Affairs and its representatives would attempt to enforce Section 114. Nonetheless, Indian agents did what they could to discourage both participation and attendance at religious gatherings by attempting to disable both the spiritual leadership and ceremonial life of Indigenous peoples. The pass system, for example, was implemented to restrict the

movement of Indigenous peoples and hinder their ability to partake in religious ceremonies off their home reserves. Such measures might seem paternal at best and though Aboriginal people now regularly participate in spiritual gatherings, the draconian principles of earlier repression remain difficult to comprehend, given the healing power that one of my colleagues tells me about in her twenty-first century participation in Indigenous spiritual observances:

> While the pass system was introduced to control Indian crossings over the international border, to protect settlers' property, and to deal with problems related to the alcohol and trade and prostitution, it was also seen as an effective means to discourage attendance at Sun Dances. (111-112)

Government bans on the religious life of Indigenous peoples, while currently relaxed, remain an important cause of linguistic decline amongst Aboriginal people in North America. My Cree friends and colleagues have said many times that if I want to understand their culture I should attend their ceremonies because there I can hear and begin to comprehend the spirituality expressed in *Nehiyawewin*.

The *mâhtâhitowin* is a traditional give-away feast in *Nehiyawisîhcikewin*. I will restrict my discussion to linguistic information and Eurocolonial disdain for these cultural practices, as I have no authority to elaborate on their meaning. Soon I hope to attend a *mâhtâhitowin*; my colleague tells me that she takes belongings with her to distribute at the give-away ritual. Unfortunately, these practices were ridiculed earlier in our colonial history as interfering with the acquisition of personal surplus. Government officials also faulted give-away customs as the cause of poverty on reserves, rather than assigning blame on government greed and failure to fulfill treaty promises at a time when the near extinction of the buffalo resulted in the starvation of many Plains Indians (Pettipas 98). Pettipas argues: "Very rarely were giveaways

equated with one of the major requisites of Christian behaviour, that is, the charitable redistribution of one's goods for the benefit of the less fortunate" (98). Fundamentally opposing worldviews underlined both government and church contempt for traditional Aboriginal culture, as non-Natives perceived the communal foundations of Indigenous practices as threatening to the purported higher achievements of individual effort (Pettipas 99).

Another Cree friend honoured me with an invitation to a Ghost Dance, what I thought was called a *cîpayisimowin*, at a reserve in East Central Alberta not quite three years ago, and I believe I am not appropriating what is not mine when I share my experience in a careful way.

## *Sâpohtawân* – Ghost Dance[44]

Mid-June 2004 and it feels
like January. Wind stirs up
white caps on the small lake,
on the small reserve, where
on a big hill stands an amphitheatre
with a roof but no walls.

We will not dance
the Ghost Dance on that hill.
Over there, where the young men
construct a lodge from the trunks
of young Black Poplar trees,
there we will dance with the Northern Lights:
*ekota nikamâmawinîmihitonân.*

Two tripods hold up the lodge;
a small fire burns near each tripod.
Flames leap like northern lights.
Blankets cover the cold ground.
Containers filled with food cover
the blankets at one end of the lodge,
the end where the women sit.

Seven men sit along one angle
of the elliptical structure, share
four drums, sing,
sing, sing the Ghost Dance song.
*enikamocik sâpohtawân nikamowin.*
One man has a voice
sweet as Saskatoon syrup.
Another man doesn't sing
but pretends he's a chicken.
Everyone laughs when this trickster –
*awa môhcohkân* –
crows at unpredictable times.

A helper – *oskâpewis* – serves *pimîhkân*
near the tripod at the men's end of the lodge.
We dance several circles,
the chicken-man sings several chicken songs,
and everyone laughs at this funny man.
*ekwa kahkiyaw epâhpihâyâhk*

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[44] I gratefully acknowledge Shirley Thunder for teaching me the correct name for the Ghost Dance – *sâpohtawân* – and for offering me cultural assistance in revising this poem.

*awa ewawiyateyihtâkosit nâpew.*
Then we sit on the blankets on the ground,
ready to feast. A young man
quietly tells me not sit cross-
legged. "*Môya kitôhkapin,*" *ehitewit.*
I have since learned
to sit properly.
*ekospîhk ekîkiskinohamâkosiyân*
*kakwayaskapiyân.*

The food, prepared by the women,
is now served by the men.
The men serve the guests first.
All manner of food, Cree and not,
including a bucket
of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

We dance some more.
*enîmihitoyâhk ayiwâk.*
Chicken-man, from Onion Lake,
cackles some more.
*kâh-kitot ayiwâk awa môhcohkân.*
We eat more food.
*emîcisoyâhk ayiwâk.*
The man with the voice sweet
as Saskatoon syrup sings some more.
*enikamot ayiwâk awa nâpew*
*emiyotâmot tâpiskôc*
*sîwâpoy ohci misaskwatômina.*

Two years after the Ghost Dance,
a year-and-a-half after Dad
walks through the opening,
I learn that the Cree call the
Ghost Dance *sâpohtawân*, not
*cîpayisimowin*, because the ghosts
walk through. They pass right through.
*sâpohtewak* just like Dad:
*ekîsâpohtawehtew.*
And those ghosts who are dancing,
the ones we dance with,
they are very beautiful.
*ekwa kânîmihitocik*
*kâwîcinîmihitômâyâhkik*
*mistahi katawasisiwak.*

I appreciate Sarah Whitecalf's guidance mostly for her wisdom in not rejecting white people who might assist in preserving her language. So, too, do I appreciate my Cree colleagues for accepting me and my efforts to learn *Nehiyawewin* and participate in safeguarding it. All these provide me a fine model in avoiding an essentialist position in my journey away from writer's block. Realizing that the urgency of preserving linguistic diversity is so very much bigger than one thesis can communicate, I am comforted in knowing that I have shared, in speech and writing, my understandings with those I associate, even neighbours who live in my building.

**Practicing for my Defence**

The Devil's Advocate, dressed
as the mail man,
lives in my building, holds
open the door for me
while I check my mail,
asks me about my thesis.

I tell him I'm "doing"
my Master's in English, knowing
he won't quite get it
if I tell him too much.

"Well, what's it about?"

"I'm writing prose and poetry
in Cree and English."

"Well, what's it about?" he persists.

"I'm writing about linguistic
diversity and why that's
important and the shame and
tragedy that so few care and
the wisdom we stand to lose
if we let it get down to one
colonial language like English."

"Well, that sounds pretty subjective,"
he assesses my argument.

"Yeah, I guess it is," I concede,
readying myself for the defence.

"Well, if it's so subjective
how can you support it?"

"Have you ever taken a
graduate course?" I ask,
feeling the need to take
a cheap shot. I'm on a roll now.
"You betcha, I've got lots of support.
Just because something's subjective
doesn't make it any less valuable
than something that's objective.

Just because something's got a pile
of numbers and graphs and statistics
behind it doesn't make it more
valid. That's quantitative
research. Something that's subjective
is qualitative; sure it's subjective
but it's artistic, more expressive."

I follow him up
the stairs because he's in 303
and I'm in 305. I manage
to distract him, ask him about
the weather and whether
or not he's wiped out
on the blasted ice when
he delivers the mail.

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